

Common Sense: The Odd Ideas File

The Seven Harry Potters Redux

A/N: A lot of the events in DH had stupid or catastrophic consequences. Canon Harry isn't the brightest wizard of the age...but what if he were a touch more suspicious and clever. A collection of scenes retold plus some new ideas.

A blend of humor and horror.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter was aghast as he looked at six other Harry Potter's standing around in various states of undress. One doppelganger seemed inordinately interested in his new body's male equipment: George Weasley, bastard.

"Mine works the same as yours, boyo. It'll be five galleons for that handjob, George," Harry said, more than a bit annoyed. George immediately stopped his obviously suggestive 'self examination.' "And, Granger, stop ogling Ron...it's actually my nude body he's refusing to cover up. Get dressed the lot of you!"

Harry swiveled and began glaring at Alastor Moody, who seemed rather amused in a gruff sort of way.

"Whose bollocks of an idea was this?"

Moody's eye swivels over to where the former Mundungus Fletcher is standing. That was the fatal fact that would prevent Harry from ever going along with it. Now he just needed to convince everyone else.

"And when did he have it? When Dumbledore was still alive?"

Mundungus seemed to nod, but he seemed a touch confused. Figures, useless old fall-down drunk.

"No. Absolutely not. We won't be doing anything Dumbledore knew about then...."

"Why not?" Moody growled.

"Because Dumbledore – for some half-arsed reason he never mentioned – trusted Snape. He probably told Snape all our plans...and guess who Snape told?"

A whole room full of jaws hit the floor.

Hagrid was the first to recover. "Thumpin' good wizard, I al'ays knew you'd be Harry. Thumpin' good." He sounded like he had tears in his eyes.

"Well damn. What do we do now?"

Hermione-as-Harry raised his hand (and seemed inordinately interested in the hair Harry had in his armpits for some inexplicable reason) and then said, "We travel the Muggle way."

Harry smiled. That sounded better to him. "I'll call a cab or two. There's a bus stop four blocks away. We can escort everyone out that way. I'll even ride with Hagrid on his non-flying motorcycle...."

Moody snarled. "But what if Snape did tell Vol... Err, You-Know-Who?" Harry thought it strange as to why Moody refused to say Voldemort's name. Had he always been this squeamish?

"We leave some gifts behind," Fred-as-Harry said. "We brought along a special selection of our best items."

Harry dug around in an odd looking bag and dragged out a few multi-colored potions. Mundungus had several illegal artifacts on his person and Moody had eight knives and three spare wands. Fred and George dumped out an average-looking backpacks and a small mountain appeared on the floor, everything from the fireworks they'd used on Umbridge before they'd fled Hogwarts and the swamps they'd pioneered to Peruvian Darkness Powder by the jarful and a rather large vial of a strong love potion.

"We could go to Vegas on a haul like this," Bill Weasley said. It got a few laughs from the people who actually knew what Las Vegas was.

They roughed out a plan over the next five minutes...and then Harry-as-Harry had to threaten to punch Fred unless the boy stopped humpinh Petunia's couch while half clothed. "Hands off the

merchandise, Fred. Dung, you'll never be young again. Stop fantasizing; and I want to see everything you stole from the Blacks in the next day or else I'm going to sic my friend Dobby on you." He shook his head and sighed. "Bloody bunch of wankers and perverts I have for friends...."

He walked over and dug out an old phone book and began dialing. He needed a few cabs and to figure out where the bus lines went. He was just glad he'd asked the questions he'd asked. The magical folks Harry knew got far too caught up in magic for their own good. Flying a broom was great fun...but not exactly the safest way to flee in the face of a likely enemy force.

Harry would just have to inject a bit of common sense into the things they were doing....

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Voldemort's forces were high over Surrey awaiting what they assumed would be Harry Potter and escort. But nothing came...as night drew closer, suddenly a huge array of multi-colored lights erupted just below the cloud cover.

"Down," Voldemort screamed. "Down now!"

The thirty-odd Death Eaters, plus a free floating Voldemort, made their way down past the cloud cover. The Dursley house, now visible for the first time in more than a decade, was in a massive firefight. The house itself seemed enshrouded in a massive black cloud. Huge arcs of spellwork leaped from the darkness and colored the night sky.

"The blood wards have broken, as our spy claimed. Into the house. Kill everyone there, but not the Chosen Bastard. I reserve him for myself."

The Death Eaters swooped down and landed all over Privet Drive. They dropped their brooms and prepared their wands. As a troop, they stormed over to Number Four, were enveloped in the cloud of darkness that began just inside the property line, and then bumbled their way on the lawn. More than one screamed or moaned in pain when they ran into or fell on something. A precious few managed to

make it inside the small, perfectly average home in the Muggle subdivision. It was, if possible, even darker inside.

The furniture had been rearranged inside and all of them seemed to collide into everything they found inside. No one could see any spellwork happening...but it had been so obvious from the outside. Was the battle over? Who had been fighting inside this muggle house?

Stan Shunpike – freed from Azkaban only to be placed under the Imperius Curse – was the first to discover one of the gifts left behind inside the house. He tripped over something and fell...and fell...and hit water. Water! What was a big vat of water doing in a Muggle house? Even though the curse that had settled into his mind, Stunpike knew this was wrong. Then he felt something bite his leg. He screamed. And then something else bit him. It would be a long time in coming before he discovered that the portable swamp he'd landed in had been improved to include snapping turtles and rather vicious fish known as piranhas. Fred and George had designed this particular item for the war effort.

Stunpike managed to get out of the swamp after a few dozen bites and passed out on the floor from blood loss. Luckily for him, Voldemort managed to clear out the darkness powder ten minutes after his Death Eaters entered the inky area. He discovered a scene of devastation on the front lawn. There were garden implement scattered everywhere and a bunch of unconconscious Death Eaters had obviously stumbled on them. None of the injured one would awake. Voldemort examined the residue on a rake. Draught of Living Death. They people who'd come for Potter had been prepared to set up an ambush....

Voldemort frowned. Snape had been right about the date, but wrong about the means of egress. What did that mean?

He didn't stop to ponder. He entered the house and dispelled the remains of the inky darkness. He saw a second scene of devastation. One of the Imperius'd conscripts was bleeding to death on the floor. Voldemort cast a wide area clotting charm and stunned the young man. Another few were already dead. They'd tripped on furniture and fallen onto daggers and knives. Rodolphus Lestrangle had fallen on some foul, mouldering sweater which had strangled him to death. Bellatrix Lestrangle had picked up a wand – obviously

not her own – in the chaos of a darkened room and had had her had blown apart by some kind of curse.

Voldemort did what he could. Bellatrix was dead, though. Of the thirty he'd brought only eleven were even conscious at this point. A full nine were dead, three of them in some kind of magical swamp near the kitchen of this disgusting little home. And they'd caught nothing of the Potter brat.

Voldemort decided to push up his plans at the Ministry. He needed better information. He needed Trace information.

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Fun with Polyjuice and 'Pranks' at the Ministry

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The plan for getting ahold of the locket around Dolores Umbridge's neck was vastly complicated. Hermione had wanted a snatch and grab in the Ministry; Ron wanted to attack her at her home. Harry wanted the locket and to strike a blow at the corrupt people who didn't even fight back once Voldemort just waltzed inside their doors and sat down on the throne.

Harry won the day.

The day of the attack, the plan went to perfection. They carried in the many, many vials of Polyjuice and the labeled samples of hairs from all those who had 'volunteered' them. Plus Harry had quite a few other tricks in his Never-Ending Bag. Ron said that Fred and George – in hiding at the Manchester safe house Harry had set up – had prepared a very special treat, too.

Harry took on the appearance of a cruel-looking bureaucrat, Rubnold or Ransack or something. Ron looked like a dopey janitor. Hermione looked...well, rather like her prim and proper self, just much older.

"Don't you say that the only different is that her hair flies off in every direction and mine is bushy. I know you're thinking it, but don't say it." Hermione was not amused at the comparison between her and the witch from the Misuse of Underage Magic office.

After the trio arrived inside the Ministry, Hermione found herself dragged off to court to scribe for the ugly toad Umbridge. Ron was a tad gleeful about being forced to fix a few maintenance problems in a secure office. He had the magic touch when it came to causing a bit of chaos. Harry snuck off toward Dolores Umbridge's office.

He saw a small army of bureaucrats churning out disgusting pamphlets. These people were despicable and stupid. Anyone who helped out with this kind of project was just asking for life in Azkaban after Voldemort died. Duh! Didn't anyone read books? The good guys always won in the end. Idiots like the Muggle Nazis were hung based off the paper trails they left behind.

He entered her uncomfortable little office and got to work. Task one: find the locket. He quickly established it wasn't there. The vile hag probably had it on her.

Task two: information gathering. Everything in the vile woman's files, in her desk drawers, and hidden behind one of her cat paintings went into Harry bag for later analysis.

Task three: counter-attack. They'd decided to call Harry Undesirable Number One. Well.... It was time for Harry to earn that title. He pulled a large heavy plastic sack from his Never-Ending Bag. Inside looked to be thousands upon thousands of muggle-style pencil erasers. Harry had an enormous smile on his face as he filled the vile toad's filing cabinets, desk drawers and even hidden spaces with the pink items. He placed several simple wards on those same drawers and hiding spaces. Wouldn't Dolores be having a great time in a few hours or so?

For the damage she'd inflicted at Hogwarts as High Inquisitor, she deserved no less than these...special gifts.

Harry snuck out of the woman's office and made it down to the lowest level of the Ministry building. The Dementors had penned up quite a few terrified Muggleborns. Harry walked right into the courtroom – and immediately stunned the vile Dolores Umbridge while a momentarily shocked Hermione took a moment to stun the man Yaxley who was beside her on the dais.

The Muggleborn witch on trial looked around in confusion. The Dementors didn't move, as no one had issued any orders.

"I'm telling Ron to meet us in the Atrium in fifteen minutes. We're going to need to sow a lot of confusion to get out of here," Harry said.

Hermione, not quite ready for battle, nodded and looked shaken. Harry stalked over to the Muggleborn witch and snatched a hair off the woman's shoulder. He dropped the item into a small vial of Polyjuice and then forced it down Umbridge's throat. Still stunned, the fat monster transformed into the exact likeness of the Muggleborn witch, save for her clothing. A few flicks of his wand and the clothing shrunk and was far less pink.

Then he pulled the horcrux from the woman's neck.

Hermione used a hair from their collection (it came from a nondescript Muggle man Hermione had spotted on the street one day) and forced more Polyjuice down Yaxley's throat. It would look like some sort of escape attempt...by Muggles or Muggleborn.

"Did Ron signal that he finished what he needed to do?" Hermione finally started clicking back into the plan.

"Oh, yeah, in about five minutes, the entire Ministry is going to be having some problems." Ron wasn't the smartest tool in the shed, but he had inherited the Weasley family gifts. (No, not fertility magic, like everyone always assumed.)

Entropic magic: the ability to make things fall apart. The Burrow: falling apart. Arthur's career: never really started. The household clothing: always tattered. Fred and George Weasley: able to destroy pretty much anything through a prank. The generally disheveled character of the Weasley clan wasn't due solely to their relative poverty, but rather to their family gift/curse. They could have taken up residence in the Malfoy Manor and it would have looked like a tumble down heap in six months.

Harry stepped out into the hallway and addressed the Dementors. "All of you lot into courtroom seven. We have a trial of a blood traitor in five minutes and we'll need you to keep him compliant."

The demi-demons floated away. More than one of the Muggleborns penned up in the hall sobbed in relief. Harry put his finger to his mouth. "This is a rescue operation. I'm going to get all of you out of here...."

"No." "My family." "I follow the law...."

"If you stay, they will kill you. This isn't a government. It's You-Know-Who pulling the strings here. You should get out of Britain," Harry said. He began stunning everyone to facilitate getting them out of here.

"Hermione!"

The young witch came out and began transfiguring the stunned witches and wizards into small mice. Harry collected them all up and then got ready for the next part of their plan.

Harry reached deep into his Never-Ending Bag and brought out the standard-issue smoke grenades he'd managed to mail order from America. Those gun-toting oddities would sell anything to anyone. Now, they would use a few Muggle items (enchanted for long duration) to sow a lot of confusion.

Hermione had hold of a few canisters of tear gas. When the moment came, Harry, Ron, and Hermione would throw on Bubble-Head Charms and detonate all their surprises.

Harry and Hermione knew they had about ten minutes before their doses of Polyjuice wore off.... That was just enough time to put into effect a little extra surprise.

"Dobby?"

The small elf popped into the lowest level of the Ministry and Harry quickly motioned him into silence.

"I need you to help us with a prank, Dobby...."

The elf smiled. "Dobby being happy to help Mr. Harry Potter, sir."

Harry handed over a large vial of Polyjuice and dumped in twelve hairs from his pocket. "Put this into the tea of any Auror or Hitwizard on the second or third floors. Don't be seen..."

"And don't get Kingsley Shacklebolt, Dobby," Hermione added. Harry nodded. "He helped out here and there with this plan...although he didn't know he was doing it. Idle gossip and innocent questions can reveal a lot."

The little elf disappeared. The Aurors and Hit Wizards would be busy for quite some time to come.

Harry and Hermione reached the Atrium and saw Ron was already there. Harry pulled the pin in his smoke bomb as Hermione did the same with her tear gas. Both released them while Ron threw a handful of other items – Fred and George specials – behind him. All

three quickly cast Bubble-Head Charms and made their way out of the ensuing chaos.

It would be a long day at the Ministry of Magic. A missing locket from around Dolores Umbridge's neck would be the least of their concerns.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Pius Thicknesse, Minister of Magic after Scrimgeour 'died,' stormed down to the Courtroom level. His control of the building's wards told him all sorts of hell had been going on there. He'd gotten back as quickly as he could from meeting with Lord Voldemort at the Malfoy Manor.

He had a small troop of his personal bodyguard with him. When he arrived at the courtroom, it was perfectly ordinary looking...save for the fact that there were no mudbloods in the hallway. Dolores was supposed to be interrogating them, setting up the legal fiction to send them all away to their deaths.

He pushed open the door and saw a mudblood and...a muggle!...unconscious in the courtroom. Dolores, Yaxley, and that odd witch from the Misuse of Underage Magic office were missing.

Not in a mood to be charitable, the Minister pointed at the Dementors in the room. "Kiss this Mudblood and Muggle. Now!"

He was apoplectic. It seemed that the Mudbloods had stormed his Ministry and stolen those who had yet to be tried. He wasn't going to give anymore of this filth a chance to escape. No way.

He watched with grim satisfaction as the two terrorists were stripped of their souls.

Then all Hades broke loose. The hallway filled with smoke and the Minister's eyes began to tear up.

"What in the seven circles is going on?"

The body guards surrounded the Minister. "Where is Dolores? Find me that miserable Yaxley..."

Suddenly the hallway outside the court room darkened even further and then the automated magical sprinklers kicked in. The Minister, his men, and a small number of Dementors got drenched.

"Let's go. Go. Toward the stairs."

It wasn't an easy journey up the next level. The water made everyone slip and slide around. More than one bodyguard hit the ground.

"Benson, get to the control room and turn off the water rune."

The guard did his best to run, but wound up on the sodden floor once again. The Minister headed for the elevators, but quickly realized it was a bad idea. Tear gas poured out of the thing once its doors opened.

It was quite a few minutes later before the Minister and his remaining bodyguards managed to make it to the Atrium level. The Bubble-Head Charm had just made things worse (trapping contaminated air next to his face). It had taken a few Watering Charms to remove the burning noxious gas from his eyes. The smoke was thick everywhere, but the tear gas, thankfully, hadn't spread far.

The water from the ceiling kept coming, however. Benson obviously hadn't made it to the control room yet.

The Atrium was a disaster. It looked like a massive battle had occurred here...and the Ministry had lost. There were all sorts of odd...things there. They were about the size of house elves, but tan in color. They were proceeding to rip everything apart. They were almost like the opposite of house elves.

The Minister leveled his wand and cast a Reducto at the creature. Someone off to the side shouted out, "No! Don't cast against them."

The Minister's curse splashed against the tan house elf...thing. A direct hit to the chest caused the thing to explode. Several people groaned. The pieces scattered to the four winds but almost as soon as they hit the stone, each of the fragments began to grow and change. Each fragment became an entirely new...thing. Each one

walked over to a section of wall and began to tear it down stone by stone.

The Minister groaned now. Self-perpetuating magic. These damned things would have to be caught without magic and held until the enchantment faded. Clever. Mudblood clever.

He left the folks in the Atrium to deal with the beasts. They could always put back together whatever had been torn apart.

The seventh level was freezing. The sixth level was hotter and drier than a desert. The fifth level had snow over every surface at least thirty centimeters deep. How had these...terrorists sabotaged the climate control wards? Rain, snow. The fourth level was filled with hurricane-level winds and had driven out nearly everyone who should be working there.

The third level was another battle scene. Three people who looked like Harry Potter – Potter! – were covered in blood on the floor.

"Three?" The Minister shouted.

"They're Ministry employees. Someone Polyjuiced them...."

The Minister blinked a few times. "Merlin's knapsack, what's been going on in my Ministry? And where's Dolores?"

He resumed his climb and decided he needed to start on an exercise program. He'd really let himself go in the last few decades, hadn't he?

The second floor was even worse. There were, what, eighteen or nineteen more 'Potters.' Quite a few of them looked dead.

Merlin. People who died under Polyjuice retained the look and appearance forever. Perhaps the Ministry could show one of these look-a-likes to demoralize the opposition. He'd have to run it by the higher ups lurking in the Malfoy Manor, the Minister decided.

He arrived at the top level, the executive level. He stormed immediately over to where Dolores' assistants were making pamphlets.

He pointed at the nearest one. "Is she in?"

The young wizard shook his head.

"Well, has anything weird happened up here?"

"Like what?"

"No strange weather? The charms seem to have been tampered with on the other floors."

The wizard shook his head again. "No, sir. Nothing unusual at all."

"Fine. Let me just pop in and see if there's anything unusual in here."

The Minister walked inside the rather pink office and wondered again at his chief deputy's obsession with the color – and with kittens. The woman hated muggles, halfbreeds, mudbloods...but loved kittens and the color pink. She was a bit touched in the head, but then again she was old Barty Crouch's second cousin. Insanity ran deep in that line.

He noticed an opened drawer on one of Dolores' high security filing cabinets. He pulled the thing open and was stumped for a moment. Instead of the files the Minister knew she kept, he saw a pile of pink....

No, they weren't a pile of pink...whatevers. They were rapidly expanding spiders. Acromantulas. The Minister turned and began to run, but the ward he'd tripped had cancelled the transfiguration on a few dozen of the massive spiders. Pius Thicknesse didn't stand a chance in a small confined space.

A few minutes later the seven dozen spiders managed to destroy the office door and then the fun began. The massive critters had their way with every witch or wizard on the floor – or anyone foolish enough to come to the executive level.

It would take days before a few Aurors made it to the Forbidden Forest and discovered that the huge acromantula colony there was down to only twenty beasts. Where were the rest? Hundreds or

perhaps a thousand were unaccounted for. It would be a while before the heavily damaged Ministry discovered that fact.

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Dumbledore's Last Secret

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter sat in a chair at four thirty in the afternoon when he felt an intense little pain around his scar. It didn't feel like Voldemort was angry. It didn't feel like anything he had ever felt before.

He stood up and walked over to where Hermione was sitting. She had her eyes on a small mirror. Its twin was focused on the entrance of Gringotts.

"I think it just went off," Harry said.

"I'm looking at the mirror...." A billow of smoke erupted from between the twin doors of the white marble building. "How did you know?"

Harry had already wandered off. He looked upset...and a touch angry.

Harry settled into a chair and pulled the volume on horcruxes that Hermione had managed to steal from Hogwarts months earlier. He read through the rather thin volume and saw nothing to confirm or deny the suspicion Harry now had. Dumbledore had suspected it was possible to lodge a horcrux inside a living animal, such as Nagini. Now Harry had the first true evidence that his famous scar was more than just a curse scar.

Dumbledore had to have known. That was the part that drove Harry crazy. Dumbledore.

Eventually Harry came out of his introspective funk and called Hermione to him. He expected in a few words what he expected. She paled and thumped to the floor, still conscious but dazed.

"Why wouldn't he tell you something like that?"

"More of his bloody secrets."

"Language, Harry."

"Stuff it, Hermione." She opened her mouth to respond, but snapped it shut again.

After a few minutes Hermione snagged the book on horcruxes, which she had only read fourteen times, and began a new reading.

"Is it bound to your soul? To your brain?"

Harry looked up from his newfound misery. "What?"

"The horcrux? What's it tied to? The others were a ring, a diary. Is this tied to your body, to your magic?"

Harry understood. Hermione was looking for a loophole, something that meant that Harry didn't need to die. "Nagini he could control utterly and completely, but he can only send me visions. He tried to possess me and I was able to cast him out."

"So, maybe his soul fragment is loosely attached to you?"

"My scar?"

Hermione really looked at the ugly scar that marred Harry's forehead. "Perhaps." She began casting charm after charm at his forehead. Harry recognized some of them as medical detection spells; others as spells in the cursebreaker's arsenal.

Harry plopped down again, a bit exhausted from the display of magic.

"It shows strong elements of dark magic, even a decade and a half after you received it. It's full of magic...."

Harry had a tiny smile, a faint ray of hope, enter his life then. "Perhaps the soul fragment survives off the dark magic in my scar then?"

Hermione shrugged. She didn't know either way what the horcrux was attached to. "I wonder why you felt the destruction of the horcrux in Gringotts? You've never mentioned this before."

Harry hadn't considered the question. "I guess I was dying the first time I killed one...and I was in a lot of pain. A bit more wouldn't have

registered. I was probably asleep when Dumbledore destroyed the ring. As for the locket...I don't really know why I didn't notice anything. It's strange. It was a strange day."

Hermione looked like she wanted to cry. She couldn't think of anything.

"I wonder if we can dispel my curse scar?" Harry asked.

At that, Hermione began to smile. Magic was something she could do. "One second. Let me dig out a few books."

"Take your time," Harry said. He knew it would be a while.

Indeed, an hour later, Hermione had tried three dozen different spells from her books. Harry still had his curse scar.

She sat down, defeated. Harry was processing through all the things Hermione had tried.

"The Killing Curse is just a spell, right?"

Hermione nodded. "A spell no one else has ever survived."

"Can you just cast a Finishing Spell at me? It works for pretty much anything. Satisfy my curiosity."

Hermione looked a bit disgruntled that she hadn't thought of something so pathetically simple. She cast the spell and a moment later Harry slumped from his chair, passed out from the massive pain that surged through his body.

Hermione watched as his curse scar began to fade...and as a nasty black mist seemed to pour out of the closing wound. Then the mist began to scream. It faded away.

Hermione knelt down next to Harry and tried to rouse him. It took a few moments of shaking but eventually his eyes blinked open.

"Wha?"

"It's gone... Your scar, the horcrux. I saw it come out of your head...."

Harry pushed himself off the floor. "Good. Good! I'm going to reanimate Dumbledore's body so that I can kill him myself. No wonder Snape didn't hesitate to kill the old bastard...."

"Harry!"

"Fine. I'll just go desecrate his monument, turn it into a giant turd?"

Hermione looked shocked and then she began to laugh. "Well, I guess that's almost as good a gag as Polyjuicing yourself to look like Rabastan Lestrage and having him command the goblins in Gringotts to take down his brother's and sister-in-law's effects to the family vault. A box, which incidentally, contained a time-delayed explosive acid bomb crafted by Fred and George Weasley...."

"Yes, a good little trick, isn't it?"

"Especially considering that the Malfoy vault happens to be directly beneath the Lestrage one and the Carrow vault is just to the side. You likely took out the combined wealth of three Death Eater families."

"I love it when a plan comes together."

"Get that dopey smile off your face."

"I'm not a horcrux any more. I can smile all I want. And then curse that meddling old coot until the other spirits turn on the old fossil and reincarnate him as a spineless flobberworm."

Hermione nodded and sighed.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The Décor Could Really Use Some Improvement

A/N: I enjoy Harry in Azkaban stories, but I've not yet come up with a reason to write a full story. Here's a little morsel of an idea.

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The quartet trooped up from the rickety dock to the imposing steel gates of Azkaban prison.

"I still don't see why I'm here," Severus Snape grumbled.

"The boy might need potions," Dumbledore shot back.

The aged warlock was severely angry at having been deceived for nine months. Harry Potter was innocent. The Wizengamot had sent an innocent to Azkaban (and not for the first time). He needed the boy, as the boy would have to stand against a rapidly strengthening Voldemort, but who was to say what they would find inside the prison walls.

Dumbledore knocked on the thick steel door and an Auror came a few minutes later to open it.

"I have a writ for the release of Harry Potter."

"Potter, eh? Let me see the writ then." The suspicious Auror cast a few detection spells and found the document genuine.

"Well, sorry to hear that he wasn't guilty. The damage has already been done, I suspect. Mr. Potter isn't exactly all together any longer...."

Remus Lupin almost collapsed against the door in anger and sadness. He'd been one of the few who argued that Harry was innocent. But no one listened to a werewolf.

Minerva McGonagall, the final member of the quartet, had demanded to come along to help release one of her former Gryffindors. Of course, with his 'conviction,' his wand had been snapped and he'd been expelled from Hogwarts. But, that didn't change things in her mind. She had a steely frown on her face.

"Take us to his cell," she said.

The walk was long and horror inducing. Potter was apparently kept in the deepest dungeon of the prison, right next to the chamber where the Dementors congregated between duty rounds. Harry Potter had twenty four hour a day exposure to the foul creatures.

"Who configured this?"

"Scrimgeour, when he became Minister," the Auror said. Remus began plotting. Rufus was a dead man, he just didn't know it.

The guard performed a magical charm to reveal a door in what was seemingly a solid stone wall.

"High security got tighter after Sirius Black escaped and the Death Eaters broke out a year ago."

Even Snape looked a bit queasy at all this.

The Auror guard opened the door and the quartet was shocked to listen to a raspy voice singing. "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down."

He began the little ditty again before Dumbledore could summon up the nerve to step inside the small, fetid space. "Pocket full of posies...."

Suddenly the grating voice stopped and an emaciated Harry Potter. "Mr. Spattergoit, you look awful."

Dumbledore pointed to himself, questioning the statement. He didn't like the name Harry had just given him, but the boy was obviously disturbed. Harry, in truth, was the one who looked awful.

"Harry, it's Professor Dumbledore."

"Mr. Spattergoit, what a pleasure you came. No one told me otherwise I'd offer you some tea." Harry gestured toward the battered metal bucket he used as a toilet.

Dumbledore frowned. He certainly wasn't a disgusting, virulent wizarding disease, even if Harry kept addressing him that way. He would never accept any of Harry's 'tea,' either.

"We found evidence that you were innocent, Harry. You didn't kill the Dursleys, Harry."

The disturbed young man looked up and frowned. "Well of course I never beat any dustbins, Spattergoit. Going soft in the head, are you?"

"Dursleys," Dumbledore began to say.

"Dear Professor Gonorrhea, don't lurk in the doorway. Mr. Snorkack and Mr. Tinkerbell need to come inside..."

Minerva McGonagall moved unconsciously, as she knew she was now 'Professor Gonorrhea,' a vile muggle disease, but she couldn't open her mind to protest.

Tinkerbell and Snorkack, neither one knowing exactly which was which, came into the cramped, vile cell.

"Open your mouth, Potter," Snape said. "I have some healing and strengthening potions for you."

"I believe Tinkerbell just farted. Someone rap the old beast on the nose with a rolled up newspaper. Bad Tinkerbell."

Snape snarled in response, readying his arm to throw the potions to the floor and destroy their value. Minerva stayed his hand. She pulled them from him and then whispered, "Bad Tinkerbell."

Harry had continued on with his mad muttering. Remus helped the underage wizard to his feet. "It's very kind of you, Mr. Snorkack. I was led to believe your kind only existed in Sweden, but that's clearly wrong. I do wonder as to where you keep your Crumpled Horn, but I shan't ask in front of mixed company...."

Remus gasped and almost dropped Harry. Minerva tamped down any reaction and started opening the potions bottles that Severus had brought along. Harry swallowed them – not without complaint – and tried to sing a song about blackbirds.

Snape opened his mouth and began spewing invective before Harry's head turned toward the bitter man. "Tinkerbell, I believe you've been infected with nargles."

"Don't call me, Tinkerbell, you useless little shite...."

Remus tapped Snape on the shoulder and the dark man stopped his ranting.

"I wonder who in the world called all of you here. Mr. Spattergoit, could you elucidate?"

Dumbledore looked surprised for a few minutes. "Well, err, the Muggle please-men found the murder weapon – a knife apparently – over at someone else's house a few hours after your trial, Harry. We only just got word from some of our contacts, you see."

"Tinkerbell and Spattergoit humping in a tree. Ashes, ashes, all the grease blows up..."

Snape lurches across the room as if to attack Harry.

"What a vicious dog, Mr. Spattergoit. He really should have been put down years ago. In fact, there's only one treatment for him now."

He pushed Remus toward the door. Remus bumped Minerva out of the room and then Remus fell on the floor outside the cell. Harry quickly snatched Dumbledore's wand from the aged warlock's hand. He waved the wand and said, "Flibberty Gibbet Muggledy Doo."

Harry stepped out of the tiny cell just as the door rapidly slammed shut, propelled by magic. Harry stuck the wand just in front of the door frame so that it shattered into two pieces when the door sealed.

The Auror shouted upon witnessing this. "The wand's ruined. We won't be able to reverse the locking charm.... Damned thing's the strongest the Unspeakables have ever crafted."

Harry leaned against the wall and slumped to the floor. He'd stopped muttering and singing by now. "The decor has definitely improved in there, what with Spattergoit's robes." Harry smiled an evil little grin. "I don't care if either of them gets out. The real murderer is in that room now, along with his enabler. Let them both starve to death."

Remus, Minerva, and the Auror all looked at the suddenly very aware Harry Potter with shock and surprise.

"Someone help me up. I'll answer your questions as we leave this hell hole."

The Auror looked like he wanted to disagree, but Remus silenced the man with a glare.

Minerva looked back toward the disappeared cell door, but then remembered what Harry had just said.

"You said that the murderer is in that cell now...."

Remus held Harry as they began to walk from Azkaban.

The Auror trailed behind trying to figure out what to do. In truth he could do nothing until he summoned other people, cursebreakers and Unspeakables, to help unseal the door. Those nonsense words could only be reversed by the same wand that cast the locking charm; an important security precaution in a place like this...which Harry had just turned again them. The provision was so new there weren't even any laws or regulations to prohibit what Harry had just done. It wasn't yet a crime.

Harry turned his head a bit toward Minerva (or Professor Gonorrhea). "Snape accepted the mission from Voldemort. He convinced Dumbledore I was guilty...and the old fool went along with his pet murderer. I never did figure out why Dumbledore trusted Snape...but I saw the things Severus Snape can do in my visions. He was also the one who overheard the prophecy that links Voldemort and me...the one who condemned my parents to their deaths. I hope Dumbledore dies first in that small, disgusting cell. Not even a house elf can pop inside, you know...."

Remus sobbed even as he held Harry up. Harry's raspy voice was weakening as he hadn't used it much in the last few months, but he had a little more to say.

"After I was convicted, Snape went back and hid the bloody knife in Piers Polkiss' house and then cast an Imperio at a Muggle constable to investigate the boy. It was all part of an involved plan, one you

believed without question...." Harry glared at his former Head of House.

"How did you know?" Remus asked.

"I found out after I was here. I still have the visions, of course it's worse because of the Dementors being so close. Voldemort's plan was to weaken me with the Dementors, the lack of food, the knowledge of those close to me betraying me, and the physical coldness of sleeping on stones forever. Then he'd produce the evidence to free me, from another Imperius'd muggle handing a packet to Kingsley in the Muggle Prime Minister's office, so I'd be easy pickings. Snape was to have portkeyed me away later tonight from out of the Hogwarts infirmary. He seemed particularly gleeful when given that part of the assignment."

Minerva McGonagall had never been speechless before, but she was now. Remus just groaned in frustration.

"You're in awfully bad shape. What will you do now, Mr. Potter? I'm sure I can get you a bed in the Hogwarts Infirmary...." she said.

"I'm leaving." Harry had listened to the offer and rejected it before all the words were out of Minerva's mouth.

"I don't understand."

"Voldemort can kill everyone here. There's nothing left here of value, Professor."

"Surely you don't mean that."

He pivoted his head a few degrees. "I mean everything I say."

Minerva thought back to the earnest young man in front of her. He'd warned her years ago about the Philosopher's Stone being in danger; she'd ignored it. He'd proclaimed his innocence about his name coming out of the Goblet of Fire and she'd half doubted him. He'd proclaimed his innocence from the three murders he was convicted of perpetrating. She'd followed Albus' lead then, too. Apparently she was, like Albus, an unwitting tool of Voldemort's plans. Could she have been so stupid for so long?

"I will collect my possessions; take the contents out of my Gringotts vault; and leave. Remus is welcome to join me if he wishes, but you'll have to find your own way, Professor. You doubt me even now."

She tried to shake off the chills flickering over her body. "Do you wish to see your friends?"

"I wish to collect my belongings. If they still have my things, then I want them back. Them, as friends, no. I have no need for useless people who crumble like they did. They'll perish like every other witch and wizard on this godforsaken rock."

McGonagall couldn't formulate any more questions.

"Is that it, Professor? I knew you would be coming for a few days now, so I've made a lot of plans in my head. I can see the door just ahead. Time for one more question."

"You would really abandon us?"

"Dumbledore told me the prophecy. I have to kill the old wacko or else no one can. Dumbledore knew this and still didn't bother to see if I had committed the crimes I was accused of. He's utterly useless. I figure I'll let Tom Riddle execute the plans he has in the works before I come back in five or ten years to finish him off. He knows that the body he got from a ritual is already beginning to fail; he'll be an easy target in a few years, especially after I heal up and get some serious training. You, Professor Gonorrhea, will be a corpse in a ditch; so will all the other traitors. Goodbye, Professor."

Remus and Harry vanished in the twirl of a portkey.

Minerva later discovered that Harry left Britain eight hours later with several multi-compartment trunks. His Gringotts vaults were empty and Remus was the only person Harry allowed to accompany him on his plane ride to...wherever.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: I think numerous long speeches after getting released from Azkaban wouldn't be Harry's style. Thus a simple little explication of the plot; no simpering Ron or Hermione trying to get back into

Harry's good graces. My little twist on the old cliché makes me smile, though. A bit of vengeance; a bit of a kick in the pants; a bit of a f-you.

I might do more with this idea in future chapters...maybe.

The Girdle of Arthos

A/N: Here's an idea inspired by the easily hoodwinked Goblet of Fire. Several reviewers have noted its similarity to something called Death Note, but I'm not familiar with that universe.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter, not yet seventeen, sat at Number 4 Privet Drive and sketched out plans in a muggle notebook. He was stranded here for Merlin knows how long, so he had nothing to do but think.

He had his many tasks written out. The horcruxes, for one. Getting trained up, as another. He had a list of enemies on another page, quite long really. He had a list of allies, rather short. It was a sad state of affairs.

He started a new page: Wish List.

- Bounty hunter who works for knuts
- Voldemort's magical body falls apart and his followers go out and celebrate
- Powerful magical artifact Voldemort can't overcome
- Spell book with lethal spells Voldemort doesn't know
- The Muggle police to arrest Death Eaters for prancing around in costumes on a day other than Halloween
- Voldemort gets mad and kills all his followers before turning his wand on himself
- American Aurors show up to help; Lead Auror Dirty Harry kills everyone before the commercial break
- Scrimgeour suddenly pulls his head from his arse and does something useful
- Voldemort angers Russian government and their spies dose him with radiation

- A gas main blows up wherever Voldemort et al. are hiding out
- Dumbledore didn't really die and shows up to help
- Internal Death Eater coup, Wormtail takes over, and promptly chokes to death on his own drool
- The Death Eaters enroll en masse at a Buddhist temple and renounce violence

Harry snorted. He was just getting silly now. None of these things could happen.... But he did have some money – he thought – in his vault and in the stuff Sirius left him. Perhaps Harry needed to take a trip to Gringotts on the sly to really see what assets he had to work with.

The list in his book was rather paltry. Perhaps with enough gold, Harry could get ahold of some new assets, something to tip the scale in this war. Harry wasn't above winning by hiring some mercenaries or putting bounties on the Death Eaters' heads. He wanted to live and there was no living while Voldemort was around.

Harry grabbed for his Invisibility Cloak and decided to take the train into London. Death Eaters didn't take Muggle transportation, did they?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The hefty bureaucrat sighed with annoyance when a golden colored parchment hovered in view just in front of her face. Petitioners got more and more desperate and brazen in how they sought favor, didn't they? Some sent food or monetary bribes (Dolores didn't mind those), but then other peons sent insistent little parchments that wouldn't go away unless one read them.

"Hem. Hem." She snatched the oddly thin parchment out of the air and unrolled it.

Dear Dolores Umbridge,

You will be pleased to note that your petition to participate in the Trials of Arthos has been accepted.

What in Merlin's green earth. Trials of Arthos?

As you know, the sole victor of the contest will receive the legendary Girdle of Arthos as a reward. Since the days of Ancient Greece, this powerful magical artifact, when won in contest, provides its wearer with greatly enhanced physical and magical capabilities. The Trial begins upon your receipt of this papyrus and concludes in five days....

She'd never heard of whatever crackpot scheme this was. Perhaps the Ministry Archives would know more about this...and whether it was just another kind of hoax.

Your letter includes the names of the first ten people you must kill in this contest to the death....

What! Contest to the death! She hadn't entered any such thing. She was a wonderful bureaucrat but she had very little control over magic of any sort. Her eyes turned back to the papyrus.

...the other names of the contestants are contained in the letters you must steal from your conquered foes. Remember, only one person can win the Trials and receive the Girdle of Arthos. Should there be no single winner, then every contestant will die at the close of the Trials. Do or die!

Dolores fainted before getting any further into the message.

An hour she awoke and clutched at the letter. She re-read it again and saw the worst part at the bottom. Her list.

Tom Marvolo Riddle

Lord Voldemort

Hufflepuff Cup (Voldemort Horcrux)

Gryffindor Item (Voldemort Horcrux)

Slytherin Locket (Voldemort Horcrux)

Ravenclaw Item (Voldemort Horcrux)

Nagini the Snake (Voldemort Horcrux)

Cornelius Fudge

Lucius Malfoy

Severus Snape

This hoax of a letter instructed her to kill her former political mentor, Cornelius, the Dark Lord, and Cornelius' most generous financial backer, the slightly disgraced Lucius Malfoy. She fainted away once more.

It wasn't until well into the following day when she ran, ashen faced and pasty, into the Ministry Archives and began determining if this papyrus could have a single shred of truth to it. Merlin only knew what sorts of insane magical artifacts floated around in the world at large.

The Ministry should control all of them, of course, but some of the greedy families just wouldn't turn them over. There would be hell to pay if this wasn't hoax...and the perpetrator would die in Azkaban if this was just a joke.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter had been seventeen for two weeks and now he was sure that the war would be over in five days. It had taken him those two weeks to learn how to cast a powerful confundus charm. He had done little else but perfect that spell since July 31st. He wasn't concerned about hunting for horcruxes or anything else, much to Hermione Granger's dismay.

Harry had found his bounty hunter that would work for cheap and his unbeatable magical artifact all in one convenient package. It had been mounted to the wall in the rather disturbing Black Family Vault inside Gringotts.

The plaque next to the girdle had explained its history and the fact that Antares Taurus Black had won the girdle in the contest held in 1549 (he's been the victor against eight others, but had only killed two bloodied people in the last hour of the contest to secure the

victory for himself). Harry took the powerful device into his hands and the greatest possible plan had wormed its way into his mind.

All his enemies would die in one fell swoop.

The Girdle was far older than the Goblet of Fire and more powerful. It could destroy anyone not behind wards older than the Girdle – of which there were none left in the world.

Harry had left the vault with the Girdle and begun his independent research. The Black Accession: Magical Artifacts Acquired and their Properties was a tatty volume in the Black Library, but it more than put to rest Harry's questions and concerns. The device really had been used since 500 BC or earlier, usually in front of an audience upon the death of the previous victor. Nine competitors willingly risking their lives for the mere chance to possess the Girdle.

Powerful stuff. Even more powerful as Harry had set up this modern contest...with a good deal of help from a powerful Confundus Charm.

Voldemort would have to attempt to save his own life by destroying his own army and the most powerful of his supporters. It was exactly what Harry had asked for on his wish list. The juggernaut would crack up from internal pressures and intrigues – and no one would ever know about Harry's role in all this. He had decided not to tell anyone, not ever.

Harry kept the girdle in a very secure location (a Fidelius-protected box in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place with Harry as the Secret Keeper). The most challenging part in all this had been the double-edged Confundus Charms needed to 1) convince the Girdle that these people had entered their names willingly and 2) that the Girdle would ensnare ninety persons into the challenge instead of just the ordinary nine.

He just had to wait out five days and then each and every one of the ninety problems on Harry's list would die. The horcruxes, Voldemort, all his known Death Eaters and most strident supporters. Every member of the Wizengamot who had voted for Harry's conviction on underage magic charges. (Harry had a long memory and didn't forgive easily.)

In total, 65 Death Eaters (and Horcruxes), 18 Ministry Officials, 7 Wizengamot Members who didn't hold Ministry positions, 6 Daily Prophet staffers, and 4 Gringotts Goblins (the ones who'd allowed Dumbledore, for a price, to forge documents appointing him as Harry's magical guardian so many years ago) were all dead men walking.

He hated to be so cruel, so dismissive of human life...but it was a war. Only the most vicious would win.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Umbridge slid the heavy volume back onto the shelf in the Archive. The Trials of Arthos were real; the Girdle was real. Dolores knew she was dead...unless she killed first.

She spent another hour trying to discover what a horcrux was, but she was unsuccessful. Her best option was to target Severus Snape, as the man had just taken over at Hogwarts. She knew for sure where he would be and she was within her purview to call on the new Headmaster.

She Floo'd to Hogsmeade and began the rather steep climb to Hogwarts. She was in full sweat before she crossed the ward line.

Once inside the castle it was another steep climb up to Snape's perch in the sky, the smug bastard. Wouldn't she have the last laugh?

She pounded on the stone gargoyle and it moved aside. She walked up the last set of stairs and charged inside. "Really, Severus, you've to get better at filing your paperwork." She had decided to open with an abrasive bureaucratic salvo to calm the man. It would look like business as usual.

"Dolores, what a displeasure. I will tell...Our Lord...about your visit. We shall see what he has to say about your forms and paperwork."

Normally such a threat would have been enough to cow the pompous bureaucrat, but not today. She pulled out her wand and shouted, "Reducto." The curse, poorly aimed, flew over Snape's head and crashed into and destroyed the picture frame with a sleeping Dumbledore inside it.

Snape smiled. "I wondered if you were part of it when you crossed the ward lines." His wand was out and a curse, silently performed, flew at her. The green light hit Dolores Umbridge and she flopped over dead.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Severus smiled as he searched Dolores' handbag. Her letter was in there, but the contents made him frown. The Dark Lord had used horcruxes. Merlin. Perhaps this disgusting death contest truly was the only way to kill the vile monster.

If it were up to Potter, then everyone would die. The boy was a dunderhead and was perfectly useless as a wizard. He'd have done better to stay in the muggle world.

He sighed. Severus had long ago steeled himself to the knowledge that he would die young because of his decision to join the Dark Lord. It didn't make death easier, but he had enough self control not to whimper over that fact.

Severus added the new letter to the one he'd received. He examined his own list of names.

Goldrot

Tenterhook

Noktong

Basilknut

Rita Skeeter

Emilia Van Post

Olivia Edgecombe

Amycus Carrow

Alecto Carrow

Fenrir Greyback

Severus had, of course, used the Hogwarts Library to verify that the Girdle of Arthos existed. Its properties seemed almost impossible to believe save for the fact that they were verified (the last known Trials had been conducted in 1301 according to the book Severus read). He did not care to win the thing for himself, just to deny it for the Dark Lord.

Severus learned that proof had to be offered of every kill...proof in the form of blood. Severus vanished Dolores Umbridge's body without taking a blood sample. If anyone else managed to finish the Trials – highly unlikely – they would still fail for the lack of Dolores' blood as proof of her death.

Severus smiled, dumped a vial of poison into the teapot on his desk, and then called in his newest teachers, the Carrows, for their orientation meeting. If Severus was going to die in short order he might as well have a bit of entertainment.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Cornelius Fudge grumbled when he answered the door to his modest flat. He had once enjoyed the trappings of the Ministerial Mansion, but was now stuck in this place. The Goblins had confiscated most of the bribes Cornelius had taken over the years – as a price for their silence, as Cornelius was already in deep enough boiling water.

As a result Fudge hadn't been able to purchase the cosmetic unguents he'd used to make him look so...ministerial. He looked like the male version of a hag these days, to be honest. Plus his clothes were less than dapper.

"Yes, what is it?"

A man in a hooded cloak said one word, "Fudge?" More than one person had trouble accepting the aged wizard as their former Minister of Magic.

"Yes, yes, what do you want?"

"Your blood," the man said. With that, Walden Macnair fired off a Severing Curse at his former boss' head. Fudge fell to the ground in two pieces with plenty of blood everywhere available.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Rita Skeeter accepted the owl with a touch of nervousness. Since she had received that vile note, she had been entirely too jumpy. Someone was playing a massive prank on her and she didn't like it one bit.

She had been invited to Hogwarts to write a story on the new school year. Severus Snape had finally consented to an interview. Without a second thought she collected up her most vicious writing tools and apparated to Hogsmeade. She had wanted to write about Snape for some time now but hadn't had a good reason since his trial back in the early 80s.

She walked into the entrance hall and felt the slightest twinge of fear. Something was wrong. She slowed her walk and then transformed into her animagus shape. She flew forward and saw Severus Snape standing in a darkened hallway off to the side of the Great Hall. He had his wand in hand and looked like he had a curse at the tip of his tongue.

Rita wondered. The letter had been a hoax of some sort, but perhaps this brute of a teacher believed it. She flew behind him, returned to her human form, and stunned the man.

She bound him in ropes and woke him.

"Tell me why you were lurking in darkened corners, Severus."

"Ah, Rita. Charmed."

"Get talking."

"There's a parchment in my robe. Take it and read it."

Curiosity nipped at her, but common sense told her to be wary. "Put it into words, then we'll see about this parchment."

"I was designated to kill you, Rita."

She began gasping in shock. The crazy fool did believe in the stupid letter some vile person had sent out.

"The Girdle of Arthos is real. A few books in the Library upstairs confirm its existence and properties. In just over four days, we're all dead...if not sooner."

"No."

"Read the parchment."

"Fine, but you're a blithering idiot. Don't think it won't make the Prophet. I'll be calling for your head until the day they run you out of Hogwarts."

Severus just nodded. She witch pulled out a piece of parchment from the pocket Severus had indicated. It was a letter just like what she'd received – and burned with all the other letters from wackos.

As her eyes finished reading, she found her hand shaking. Then it seized up and crushed the parchment she'd been reading. "What did you do?"

"Nothing less than you deserve, you foul harpy."

She tried to lift her wand to curse the greasy haired man, but instead flopped over onto the floor. She died there a few minutes later of a poison soaked into the paper. Severus had swallowed the antidote to this particular poison an hour earlier before he placed the parchment inside his robes.

There were many ways to kill.

The bound Severus freed himself by performing his own animagus transformation. As a non-lethal scorpion, Severus clattered free of his conjured ropes and made his way toward his captured wand.

Seconds later, Severus vanished Skeeter's body and began his trek back to his office. That was four dead now: Umbridge, Carrows, and Skeeter. Four very satisfying killings. Severus felt quite interested in pushing forward. The quarry would eventually get harder.

It was all a game now. Life was but a timed game; the official was a stickler for the rules.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Olivia Edgecombe was an astute politician when it came to salvaging her own skin (why else had she agreed to monitor the Floo's when that hag Umbridge asked her to a few years earlier; it hadn't been for any love of the foul, fat hag). She went to ground a few hours after she received this letter. She didn't even bother verifying if it were true. All it took was someone else thinking it true...and well, Edgecombe had made enough enemies dead and alive so that she didn't expect to have a good time in the afterlife.

Too bad for her, Voldemort found her a day later. Edgecombe sobbed in the seconds before Voldemort raised his wand. So Voldemort used a rotting curse for the cowardly witch in front of him. It took Olivia Edgecombe two days to finally succumb.

He slashed her face so he could collect her blood. Voldemort didn't actually believe he could kill everyone on the list, but he might as well try while he put some contingencies into place.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Severus Snape had three days to live...so he was hunting down a werewolf. It had been a long-delayed dream of his. He now had the best possible reason to kill one.

He hated werewolves more than anything else in the world. If he had the slightest idea as to where Lupin might be, he'd make a little detour.... But, Severus did know where Fenrir was.

He knew that the disgusting creature made it a habit to set up shop near a nice muggle home just before the full moon. Fenrir had boasted about the small village the last time he'd seen the half breed monster.

Severus was carrying silver in a muggle spray bottle and had disillusioned himself before getting within a hundred meters of Fenrir. He hadn't masked his smell, but that was what would draw Fenrir close.

As Snape expected, the man was mere hours from transforming and cottoned onto his scent rather quickly.

Greyback almost loped away from the house he had 'claimed.' It took him a minute before he was in range of Snape's bottle of suspended silver. Snape began blasting and Greyback knew where to attack.

Three minutes later, Snape perished from blood loss and Greyback's lungs were completely burned out from the silver he'd inhaled.

Snape died happy with his Pyrrhic victory. He'd denied Voldemort the ability to kill the traitor in his ranks. He denied Voldemort a chance to succeed with the Trials of Arthos. Snape would see Tom Riddle in hell, where they both deserved to be.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The goblin known as Tenterhook enjoyed his life. Goblins welcomed death when it came for them, but also embraced what life they were given. At present, Tenterhook had killed seven wizards and was revered inside Gringotts as a freedom fighter. Each dead wizard was a member of the Wizengamot. Each of them had voted to tighten the noose around goblin freedoms. Each one deserved to die.

Tenterhook loved the life of a hero.

Unfortunately, he was far too obvious in what he was doing. His fellow goblin, a one-time head of the Potter Account, called Noktong poisoned his shiitake mushrooms at lunch a day before the Trials ended.

Noktong wouldn't mind the fame, but he wasn't going to be stupid about it, either.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

One day remained in the Trials and only twenty-two of the ninety remained 'alive' (including all of the horcruxes). Voldemort had been killing like clockwork, but the final group of people were rather tricky to find...even for a master of arcane magics.

He had spent a number of his free hours pondering how he had gotten mixed up in this. A magical contract with a powerful object...it didn't just take hold without consent. It had to be the Unspeakables...but by the time Voldemort had thought to summon the former Unspeakable Rookwood for insight into this Girdle of Arthos, the man was dead. He'd been amongst the first victims.

Voldemort wondered if the Unspeakables had decided to take off the kid gloves and really enter the war. Voldemort had been forced to destroy all of his support base and eliminate nearly all of his marked Death Eaters. A very few had slipped past...or at least Voldemort hadn't discovered their names on any letters yet.

Today he had to discover where Lucius Malfoy had hidden himself. Voldemort knew his former second-in-command wasn't dead...but where could he hole up? Voldemort hadn't enjoyed life this much in a long time. He knew he'd shortly lose his body, but he didn't think the magical artifact that caused this travesty could really do anything about his horcruxes.

Voldemort had also set up the equipment for a different form of rebirth ritual (all of his servants would be dead when the Trials ended so more Flesh of the Servant wouldn't exactly work). The Dark Arts were nothing if not numerous and varied. This deadly contest was but a momentary distraction. He'd rise again...and again...and again. He'd find new followers. He'd complete his work since there was no one who could stop him.

Voldemort cast a location spell for Dweeble the House Elf. Lucius had gone to ground – and sent his wife and spawn out of the country to a safe house, but Lucius wouldn't be without creature comforts, would he? The man would insist on hot meals and clean clothing and a freshly made bed. Pitiful.

Voldemort got back an answer that wasn't Malfoy Manor. He now knew where Lucius was hidden. Voldemort apparated to what appeared to be a falling down shack. He probed it a few times with his wand. It was some sort of an illusion, a wizard repelling charm.

Voldemort cast five strong Flame Spells at the old wreck. He could burn the things he couldn't easily see. Lucius would flee or die...and then the game was on.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It was two hours before the Trials closed. Harry had decided to set the final act in a Muggle environment. He'd brought the Girdle of Arthos, still in its Fidelius-protected box, to one of the courtyards inside the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. Harry placed a much shinier, far larger fake girdle on a Muggle-protected pedestal outside the nearby Radcliffe Camera. Cheating had, apparently, always been a part of the Trials of Arthos. The contest sponsor usually cheated the worst of all.

The Black Family, those few who recognized what the Girdle was, had used it shamelessly in the last few centuries to cull its political enemies. The Purge of 1622, Harry discovered in a Family Journal, killed off nine members of the Wizengamot who were holding up a Black Family inheritance (two of the nine named in the Trials had been imprisoned and thus no one was able to get to them). The 1649 Disaster had purged the first female candidate for Minister of Magic plus eight other 'innovators' who the Blacks despised. They'd used the Girdle a half dozen times more, but then seemed to forget about it.

It was terribly lucky Harry had found it.

Harry stood under his Invisibility Cloak and waited to see if anyone would find the 'Girdle' he'd placed out in the open. No one would be able to locate the real thing, even if it was now sending out a homing signal to the remaining Trial participants. They'd get here and see that girdle a hundred meters away. No problems.

Harry looked at his watch. Thirty minutes remained. No one had even approached the fake girdle.

Harry hadn't expected anyone to try. He had set up the lists a bit wastefully just so it was impossible for only one person to remain. He had listed Voldemort twice, as both Tom Riddle and Lord Voldemort, so that Voldemort couldn't win. He had listed more possible horcruxes than what truly remained to be found. As best Harry knew, Voldemort had created a horcrux with either a Gryffindor or a Ravenclaw item, but his list demanded both. He had also listed three Death Eaters who were likely still in Spain's Prison

Magica. Azkaban was a pushover compared to how the Spanish trussed up their magical prisoners.

Harry waited until the final minutes ticked down and then he saw someone in a long, heavy Muggle style trenchcoat approach the fake girdle. The man turned at the last moment and Harry saw a glimpse of his face. No nose. No color either, pale white as could be.

The man/creature snatched up the Girdle and disappeared.

Voldemort apparently expected to somehow survive the Trials without winning them. And he wanted the Girdle in a safe place.

Wouldn't he be surprised when his girdle, visually influenced by the gaudy rewards offered in boxing championships worldwide, had no power to it at all? In a few hours it should lose the transfiguration Harry had used upon it. It'd be nothing more than a small pile of leaves.

Harry reached down and closed the lid on the real Girdle. He lifted up the box and disappeared away. He tucked the box back into a closet off his bedroom in Grimmauld Place.

He sat on his bed and counted down the minutes. Finally the watch clicked past the final minute. The Trials were over. No one had won. Voldemort was dead.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It took a few days for the true scope of what had happened to make the papers. There were many bodies missing...but Pius Thicknesse had keeled over in a Ministry safehouse with an odd marking burned into the skin around his throat. A marking that looked like a simple belt with nine divots in it.

The same story was true of the editor of the Daily Prophet, Barnabas Cuffe, save for the fact that he died in a villa in Italy.

Voldemort was found a few days later inside a mostly abandoned building that had once housed an orphanage. There was a massive pile of leaves underneath him. A room a few steps away had a massive cauldron set up over a pile of wood. There were forty different ingredients on a table. And a squib named Cloate was

stunned on the floor, apparently for a role in a ritual of some sort – or as a target of possession.

In total, the newspaper quickly discovered the list of missing and confirmed dead was eighty two witches and wizards, many of them discovered with the Dark Mark on their persons.

The Ministry of Magic had been eviscerated. Only thirteen Wizengamot members remained among the living. Twelve departments had lost key staffers, most had lost their department head.

The Hogwarts Board of Governors had two members still alive. The others had all been Death Eaters or supporters (the composition had shifted greatly after Dumbledore's death).

It was a wild time to live in England.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry enjoyed the ride on the Hogwarts Express. The black gloom and doom mood was gone. People were giddy with excitement.

Harry was to be Head Boy this year and Quidditch Captain. Ron, obviously, wasn't speaking to Harry. The freckled boy had expected some kind of grand adventure and to skip his seventh year of school. Now he was back and wasn't even a prefect (the boy's grades were terrible, too much time with Lav-Lav from the year before).

McGonagall was Headmistress. Kingsley Shacklebolt was on detached duty from the Ministry as their DADA teacher. An ancient wizard named Tiberius Ogden was the Interim Minister.

Harry was excited for his final year. He had spent a good deal of time with the Black Library and knew quite a bit about the true history of the wizarding world now, not the kind of tripe Binns had tried to teach.

He'd also executed a number of further experiments with the Girdle of Arthos. Apparently Muggles could be bound to the Trials but they couldn't receive the magical papyrus advising them of that fact. When they died, other Muggles couldn't see the distinctive, magical death mark around their necks, either.

The four Dursleys, plus the members of Dudley's old gang, had made for fine test subjects. Vernon had been driving with Petunia when the curse struck them. It was chalked up as a vehicular death. Dudley had been with a prostitute instead of at school: heart attack. The other deaths, especially Marge Dursley's, were quite odd. Apparently Colonel Fubster, Marge's neighbor, had discovered the woman dead and mostly consumed inside one of the woman's dog kennels. Her dog Ripper had apparently eaten her entire liver.

Harry had also discovered that goblins loved to declare civil war on each other. He'd set up two factions and caused a minor war inside Gringotts. At last count forty-some of the beasts had died – and none of the Trial participants had survived to be killed by the Girdle. No one had any evidence at all that a magical artifact was doing all this; the papyri couldn't be seen by anyone not in the Trials and no one could speak of the Trials to anyone who wasn't bound to them.

Harry had, of course, removed several vaults worth of valuable contents out of Gringotts. After those initial four goblins had been swayed with gold and whispered promises to betray Harry so many years ago, Harry had no faith in the little beasts. If Dumbledore could get to them, then so could anyone else.

Instead he'd dug out a new basement underneath Grimmauld Place and placed his treasures there. A new Fidelius secured it better than any goblin ever could. Using dragons as high security guards was beyond stupid.

Harry sat in his seat doodling. He had finished with the Prefect Meeting and was awaiting for Susan Bones, the Head Girl, to return so they could discuss other matters. Harry wrote out a selection of nine names in a fresh muggle notebook.

They were the names of nine former and present members of the Slytherin Quidditch teams, the particularly vile and violent ones.

Then he wrote another grouping. The names of his teachers and headmasters in Little Whinging, the ones who never seemed to notice how malnourished a young Harry Potter was.

And a third. The names of Aurors who'd been part of Fudge, Umbridge, and Scrimgeour's private security details.

He wondered if there was more to learn about the Girdle. It was secure underneath Grimmauld Place, but he'd be returning for Christmas holidays.

Then he wrote a fourth list. Perhaps. Perhaps. (The names of Vernon's former boss and friends, plus two women Petunia often had over for tea, women who never said anything about how scruffy Harry always looked.)

It really was addicting. Harry could understand how the Black Family had become so powerful and feared over the years before their inbreeding had destroyed whatever intelligence and cunning they'd possessed. Their opponents never lived for very long. And no one ever discovered exactly how those people died – and no one ever proved a Black was behind it.

Power was in striking in a way that your enemies could never see or stop.

Harry started a fifth list: the names of the children of dead Voldemort supporters. No reason to let the next generation get a hold in the here and now.

He didn't need the power awarded by conquering the belt in the Trials. He didn't need more physical or magical prowess or secret gifts. He just needed a bit of creativity and a lot of malice.

The newly arisen House of Potter and Black would never fall again. Harry's enemies would never see him coming. It would take some time, but Harry would settle all debts.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: The further I wrote this, the more I began to understand how the Black family might possibly have earned their reputation in centuries past. Now Harry has access to the full might of the Black Family Tradition...rather amusing. Perhaps I'll write about those additional lists Harry's created. Wouldn't it be interesting to see Harry start a new dynasty in the Black Family vein because of his exposure to an artifact more powerful and corrupting than he could possibly realize.

As for Voldemort, he was killed by a magic far older than anything he'd planned for. Sure he could survive an Avada Kedavra, but did he plan on an obscure almost 3000 year old relic to do him in? He's dead. As for Harry's scar horcrux (the unexpected one), I purposefully left it off the list as I didn't want to have to explain why the horcrux went away, but Harry remained alive. Harry didn't know what to expect from the Girdle, so he tried to cover his bases as well as Dumbledore had prepared him. The Girdle was just more effective than anyone expected.

The Butcher's Bill

A/N: Continuation of the Azkaban storyline.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Remus turned to Harry a few hours into their flight. "Why were you willing to let me help you, Harry?"

The drowsy young man blinked twice and said, "I know you were the only person who tried to come visit me."

"How...."

"Did I know that? Lucius Malfoy is on the run from the Ministry officially, but unofficially he has piles of friends in high places. He got wind of your application to visit me and had it quashed on Voldemort's order. I was as sad for you as I was for me when I heard that...."

Remus was silent for a while. "Malfoy, huh?"

"Once a parasite invades its host, it's damn near impossible to get it out. Personally I think they'll have to burn down the Ministry with Lucius still inside it to strip him of his influence."

Remus gave out a short bark of laughter.

"So, care to tell me what the plan is? I'm on a passport as Elliot Barken (which isn't funny considering my furry little problem) and you were just magicked through the system with a nice little Notice-Me-Not charm...."

"I know. The stewardess looked at you funny when you asked for a second helping of dinner. But, sitting in first class has its perks, right," Harry said.

Remus smiled. Harry fell back asleep, but he didn't stay that way for long. He began to sweat and then he almost screamed.

Remus shook Harry back awake.

"What?"

"I saw...It was horrible. Voldemort went to Azkaban, freed his servants, but failed to get Snape out of his cell. He also recalled the Dementors to him. He'd only left them in the Ministry's control for so long because he wanted me broken. Now...now...he's sent them off to feed on the souls of Muggles. It was horrible."

Remus stroked the younger man's forehead. "When we get to Rochester, I'm going to see if the Healers can get rid of that curse scar. Dumbledore never tried, as he probably wanted you to feel this connection for some obscure reason. But I want you to heal."

"The Mayo Magical Clinic, I never knew such a thing existed before you told me, Remus."

"They're the best. I started researching options as soon as I knew we'd be coming to release you."

Harry's mind was running a mile a minute and he was sweating like he'd just finished an hour in the gym. "You need to dump your Order portkey. It got us away from Azkaban, but they can likely use it to track you...."

Remus nodded. "I already did. It went down the toilet back at Heathrow."

Harry began breathing more evenly. "I'm going to try to sleep again."

"We'll get you there. Direct flight to Minneapolis, then a portkey to the clinic. They're the best, Patient X."

"Anonymity will have its price, I assume."

Remus half shrugged. "I didn't speak with them for long while you were in Gringotts, but I got a few details. Private room on a secured floor in the hidden magical section of the clinic. Gold immediately upon demand; twenty percent over list prices."

Harry nodded and then tried to settle back to sleep.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry finished his third week at the Mayo Magical Clinic and looked like a new person. The years of malnutrition had been wiped away. All of his broken or weakened bones were regrown. The hospital had even arranged for a wandcrafter to visit Harry; he had a new magical focus on the bedstand next to him. The only major remaining problem was Harry's long-term memory.

Ninth months of constant Dementor exposure had rotted away huge hunks of his mind: nearly all of his happiest or strongest memories. Harry had spent three hours with Mind Healers every day for the last two weeks. They were trying to restore what they could or at least repair the huge gaps in his memories.

He couldn't remember ever visiting Diagon Alley or owning an owl named Hedwig (who'd flown away after Harry's incarceration) or playing Quidditch.

As of the present moment, Harry had virtually no pleasant memories of his time at Hogwarts. But the bad moments, the cruel words, the suspicions of his second and fourth year stood out like supernovas in an otherwise blackened sky. He had nothing to draw him back to England.

He was scheduled to leave the Clinic tomorrow afternoon. He and Remus had been debating where to go next. Dumbledore hadn't survived his stint inside Azkaban (although Snape had...and couldn't explain how Dumbledore had died or where the man's blood had gone, according to the Daily Prophet). The Order would be coming for Harry – for vengeance perhaps or just to ensure he stood against Voldemort. McGonagall had surely reported Harry's statements by now...and his intention to let Britain fall to Voldemort's plague.

"We blend in here, in America, some small town, live a mostly Muggle life. We can get false identification...." Remus was completely enamored with this idea.

"I think setting permanent roots is asking for trouble."

Remus sighed. "I suppose you just want to travel the world then, like a wandering cloud?"

"Not exactly. Travel the world, healing up, learning what we can from place to place, master to master...."

"You seem to have a plan," Remus said.

"Did you know that South America, save for muggle conquerors, has never been conquered by a dark lord? They have a wide variety of unique magical creatures there and oddities of magic in all sorts of flavors...."

"What are you saying?"

"We're starting in Peru. I read all the books you bought over the last few weeks, Remus. We're going to figure out what's so special about the ancient ways, magic inspired by the Inca, the Aztec, and the Maya."

Remus shrugged. "I'd still rather have a permanent place...."

"Fine, we'll have a safe house. In America even, but don't think we'll be spending that much time there. I heard a nurse talking about how Britain is calling in every favor it has to look for some kid called Harry Potter. Heard of him? Apparently the letters getting sent around have labeled him a 'strategic national asset' and are demanding repatriation post haste...."

"Good thing," Remus said, with more than a touch of sarcastic irritation in his voice. "Get that dangerous Mr. Potter off the street wouldn't it? They'd lock him in a training facility and force him to learn combat magics...probably under someone like Alastor Moody."

"Exactly my point. I rather like being Patient X. Moving around is more likely to keep us anonymous than settling in."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry and Remus got out of the United States a few hours before Britain illegally conducted a massive, invasive magical scan of every person inside the borders. Performing the spell destroyed the ancient artifact the Ministry had pulled from the Department of Mysteries to power such an enormous magical drain – and resulted in no information.

Harry didn't mind being hunted...but he also refused to be found. He insisted, once in a small village outside Cusco, that the old wizard he'd hired as a tutor instruct Harry first in methods of evasion and stealth. The old man, missing half his teeth from a hard life in and among the jungle, laughed and began jabbering away in his bastardized version of Spanish. With the translation spell, Harry caught a bit over two-thirds of what the man said.

Harry assumed the rest was just swearing and insults.

He progressed quickly that first day. After all, the wizard spat out a couple hastily explained spells and techniques and then threw a portkey at Harry. Engraved onto the underside of the tin can was a small map...through drug cartel-owned lands. Harry had to do or die in his first task of using basic spells to avoid detection by Muggles.

Remus knew none of this at the time it was happening. The pleasant werewolf was busy arranging for a plot of land and then erecting a small magical shack upon it. It wouldn't look out of place from the outside and wouldn't feel uncomfortable when inside.

Harry dragged himself toward Remus at eight o'clock that evening looking like every bug and small beast in the jungle had dined on him in some way.

Remus went pale for a moment and then began to yell. "You've been out of the hospital for three days and you've been gallivanting about the jungle. Are you insane?"

Harry tried to calm Remus down. "I'm not, but my new teacher is...." Harry's calming technique wasn't very effective. Remus just got angrier.

After ten minutes of yelling, Harry had to stun his friend.

An hour later, a much subdued Remus listened to Harry's explanation without a peep.

The next Harry and Remus both went to see this new teacher.

The aged wizard stood up and bowed. "Welcome to my house, Mr. Evans. My name is Quizquiz and I accept you as my pupil. Too many" and here his voice rasped out the unfamiliar words Harry

assumed were the swear words of his teacher's first language "polluted my house so I never work with someone who can't pass a simple, er, pre-test."

"Simple?" Remus asked.

"I could have sent my student against a conclave of wizard cannibals south of here. Perhaps we save them for the final exam. My best area of magic is illusions. I can create you a room of gold that will feel real to your fingers. You can put the coins into your pockets and keep them for days. That is but a small taste of what I can teach you. I am not the person to learn from for battle spells or the like...but with my teachings perhaps you won't find yourself in battle, eh?"

Harry smiled and nodded. Remus finally lost his anger and seemed interested in spite of himself and his misgivings.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The weeks passed quickly in Peru. Remus had joined in with many of the lessons Harry took on truly advanced illusion magic. No one in Britain knew these kinds of things, Remus knew. He'd never even seen a book in the Hogwarts Library – or the British Magical Library – on such topics.

One day Harry returned home from his lessons and began working on a type of permanent illusion, a form of homework. But what he had in mind wasn't anything his mentor had ever mentioned.

Harry Potter spent a week before he cast the spell. A massive muggle-style blackboard shimmered into view. "It's just like the ones I saw in school...."

The permanent illusion of the blackboard wasn't the impressive part...it was the knowledge contained on that board.

Across the top of the right half were scrawled the words, "The Butcher's Bill." Below that, in tiny writing, were the names of almost seventy British witches and wizards.

Two of the names were in red: Albus Dumbledore and Amelia Bones. The others were in white.

"Those are the betrayers," Harry said to Remus, "the ones who voted to send me to Azkaban. They heard my testimony under veritaserum that I wasn't guilty. They saw that my wand hadn't cast any spells of a lethal nature. They chose to label me veritaserum-resistant – although such a thing has never before happened – and disbelieve the evidence and the truth of what I was saying."

"Amelia died?"

"I don't know, but the intelligence gathering spells I tied into the illusion don't lie. Same class of spell you used in the Marauder's Map, I'd suspect."

Remus nodded. "You didn't put your friends' names up here."

"I don't care if they live or not. They didn't send me away, but they also didn't support me when I needed them most. But the Wizengamot members...well, we won't be returning until every one of them appears in red print. As for the blasted Order of the Useless Phoenix, I expect them to perish rather quickly without a leader to guide them. Not worth the space on the board...."

The left portion of the board was filled with larger writing and a number of classes that Harry wanted to master before returning to the land of his birth. "Mind magics (China?), Soul magics / Immortality reversal (Egypt?), Magical military tactics (America), Device enchantment (Belgium/Switzerland), Assassination techniques (Bulgaria/Russia)...."

The list was long. Remus saw it comprised many, many years worth of study. It seemed Harry had finally committed his plan to...err, paper.

"Only you and I can see this illusion, Remus. But it's the first draft. I don't think I could survive against that madman in a true duel, so we'll have to even the odds a bit. I plan to cheat, lie, beg, and steal my way to a victory when it's time. That's the reason illusions will be so useful. Perhaps Voldemort will be called out by Harry Potter – an illusory one – and then I can put a bullet through his brain...."

Remus shrugged. It certainly wouldn't be how he'd choose to face this foe, but Voldemort was likely Harry's problem.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The years passed quickly. Remus had never seen the world, as he'd always lacked the funds, but Harry made sure they blended training with entertainment. In Peru, they'd gone to Machu Picchu and deciphered some of the ancient Incan runes in use there. In Australia, Harry had learned to surf (saying that it was excellent for his balance...). Remus had picked up calligraphy as a hobby in China; Harry had made it a point to hike a 100 kilometer section of the Great Wall.

Remus was a museum and library kind of guy. Harry often tagged along...although Remus refused to do many of the stunts Harry pulled. Skydiving (which Harry loved), SCUBA diving at the Great Barrier Reef, erumpent hunting in Africa (Harry chose to stun, rather than to kill, so he could drain off some of the explosive fluid in the erumpent horn), and dozens of other sports that gave Remus shivers just thinking about them.

But today was the day.

Every member of the Wizengamot who had voted to convict Harry Potter was dead. The Order of the Phoenix was decimated. Voldemort had indirectly, through his proxies, controlled the British Ministry of Magic for four years. Other magical nations around the globe began to wake up to the threat of Voldemort a few years ago. Voldemort waged battles on three fronts: the Americans attacked him through insertions into Britain; the French, Belgians, and Germans waged war from the across the Channel; a loose confederation of Asian magical nations attacked from afar with magics not known in Britain.

Voldemort responded by securing the borders of his country and trying to ferret out any would-be invaders or rebels.

Today was the day when Voldemort failed to repel the invaders.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry rode the small outboard boat to Azkaban, the farthest side from the prison. From what Harry had gleaned over the years,

Voldemort had turned it into his shadow Ministry. The real power was here, not in London.

Voldemort had no need for a massive prison. His enemies died swiftly – or after painful interrogation if they possessed any knowledge worth possessing. But he needed a place for the true policy of his nation to be developed and implemented.

Harry levitated himself the forty meters from his boat to the island. He had brought some useful items with him, magical devices that worked off the magic of music and dissonance.

He Disillusioned himself and walked the half mile through the barren wasteland. He dropped one device at the north end of the former prison. It took him an hour to quietly loop his way around the building and plant the other three devices. A few minutes later he returned to his boat and piloted it a mile away from the horrifying island.

Harry still dreamed of the place every night. Perhaps tonight, after the sort of exorcism, he would not.

Harry used his wand to cast the activation spells on the small devices. A few seconds later a tremendous noise filled the air...then it got worse. The acoustic weapons Harry had placed near the old prison were shaking the place apart. Some of the stones were perfectly placed and had dissolved into sand because of the intensity of the dissonance.

No one inside the former prison survived when the place imploded.

Azkaban Prison was dead. Voldemort's inner bureaucracy was destroyed. Harry Potter had reentered the war in a big way.

He couldn't care a lick for anyone still in Britain. Harry wanted to close this horrible first chapter to his life. For that to happen, Voldemort needed to die.

Harry wordlessly moved his wand through an intricate set of patterns. Within a minute, the utter devastation of Azkaban was gone, replaced with a perfect illusion of the former prison. When the time came, Harry would use shock and awe to reveal to the world at large what he'd done.

Timing meant everything in a battle like Harry was preparing to fight.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A Father's Love

A/N: I love a well-written Harry as neglected twin story. The Sacrifices set of stories by Lightning on the Wave (multi-million word count) has quite a crafty Lily and clueless James. Unsung Hero offers up a brilliant Harry and a puffed up twin bolstered by clueless parents and Dumbledore. I wanted to try one where Harry isn't neglected, where at least one of his parents doesn't get caught up in the fame, where Dumbledore is more of a problem than Voldemort ever could be.

Edited January 26, 2008.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Albus Dumbledore leaned down and plucked up a plump toddler from his crib. "Christopher Potter was hit with a Killing Curse – and he survived it..."

Here, a wounded, tired James Potter interrupted. "No." He wasn't hysterical; he wasn't in deep denial. His 'no' meant something else.

"What?" People didn't often disagree with Albus Dumbledore on questions of magic. He was, after all, one of the most powerful wizards in the world.

"No. I don't agree with your interpretation of the obvious facts...."

"Well, it's obvious...."

"No," James said again. "What's obvious is that Voldemort learned of our location from one of your Order members...."

"I'll have the Aurors look for Sirius Black."

James Potter shook his head. "We switched Sirius out for Peter. Sirius was to be the decoy, to draw attention away from Peter, but it seems Mr. Pettigrew, my one-time friend, was either tortured for the secret or willingly gave it up."

"Why didn't you tell me?" A touch of fury tinted Dumbledore's words. He didn't like being kept in the dark, even about something like this.

"It's my family's safety. It was a bad decision...this whole use of arcane spells to hide in plain sight was a bad idea."

"You agreed," Dumbledore said. "No buyer's remorse...."

"Fine, but I won't make the same mistake twice. Voldemort came here tonight, attacked our wards with help from a traitor, and perished in the magical backlash he accidentally created...."

Dumbledore looked confused. "No, James, I think you're confused. It's obvious that Voldemort died in the nursery...."

James shook his head. "It's obvious you're insistent on painting a target on one of my son's foreheads. Voldemort died as a result of overconfidence in his cursebreaking skills. Happens all the time with the high-end magical thieves. Forty percent mortality per year is the current estimate. That's the only story I will publicly support, Albus."

"But the people have a right to know...."

"No. My children have a right to safety and relative anonymity. You will not make them a target of whatever Death Eaters are still out there, do you hear me?"

"I think you're distraught. Rest up, help Lily heal from that nasty bump on her head...."

"You may tell people that Voldemort died and you're still investigating exactly how that happened. Say anything else, Albus, and I swear you won't like the consequences."

"Fine, James. We'll pick this conversation up tomorrow."

"You can meet me in the hunting lodge."

"It's not warded like this place is...."

"This place was warded to the high heavens and look what good it did." James shook his hand, still clutching Voldemort's cloak.

"Well, at least allow me to contribute some protections, James."

"Good night." James pointed toward the exit from the property. "You'll want to take Voldemort's cloak and his snapped wand as proof."

Dumbledore examined the vile wand. "It didn't break in a natural way did it?"

"Between my two hands. That thing would have been a magnet inside the Ministry and it would have been stolen faster than I can say, 'Aspiring Dark Lord.'"

"I wish you wouldn't have done that."

"We'll talk tomorrow. I have children to attend to...."

"I can send Poppy."

James shook his head. "I'll engage a Healer from St. Mungo's. Good night."

Albus grudgingly left. He had a lot of people to contact.

James, on the other hand, sat down with a whiskey while the Potter elves began moving the belongings from the small house they were in back to the main Potter Manor a few dozen miles away. It had some of the oldest wards in Britain, it sat upon the nexus of three ley lines and had a natural magic sink deep in the earth underneath it, it was situated better than Gringotts was (even without dragons as guards)...but Dumbledore had talked Lily into his crackpot scheme regarding the Fidelius Charm. Lily, curious Charms Mistress-to-be that she was, lapped it up like fresh cream.

James had grumbled. No Head of House ever liked not being in absolute possession of the wards protecting him and his family. Not when he went from incredibly strong wards and a defensible position to a tiny home with no escape paths...and someone else in charge of the wards.

It was a perfect recipe for a disaster....

That bastard! Why? Why! Why had Dumbledore pulled James, Lily, Christopher, and Harry from safety into a profoundly unsafe environment? Why was he so interested in Christopher now?

It was clear Dumbledore had plans for at least one of his children. He had looked them both over and selected Christopher as if...as if he'd come here knowing what he'd find. The bleeding arsehole. Whatever twisted things Dumbledore had in his mind, James would not let them happen.

James now classified Dumbledore as an enemy. Albus had let at least one traitor into the Order. Albus had shown up within ten minutes or so of Voldemort blasting his way into the house. The man had likely placed a series of notification wards...so he'd know when the attack he'd expected happened.

James's confidence in Albus had decreased the longer he'd been graduated from Hogwarts. Time and time again, Dumbledore went up against Voldemort and did not defeat the evil wizard. Time and time again, Dumbledore had used mere stunners against Death Eaters...to turn them over to the Ministry...to 'escape' on their way to Azkaban.

James had advocated for sterner tactics...or at least for an Order-controlled prison away from the Ministry's corruption. A few others, like the Prewitt brothers and Benjy Fenwick, had agreed, but Albus quashed the idea. Fenwick and the Prewitts were dead; James had nearly died; Albus wouldn't change his tactics. Dumbledore was the new enemy.

He wanted something from Christopher. He had a rather willing ear in Lily Potter. James had to do...something...to stave off the ruination that Voldemort himself hadn't caused a few hours earlier.

James walked to the bedroom that was nearly empty of its contents. He had a small mirror there – and his wife, Lily, was asleep on the bed.

"Padfoot," James said into the mirror.

A few moments passed before the mirror lit up with the face of another wizard. "Prongs, you look like hell."

"Pop over here. I need some advice."

"Roger!"

The mirror went dark. It was going to be a late night. James had a lot of thinking to do. All roads led back to Albus. What was his one-time mentor up to? How had he turned so deceitful, so scheming without anyone noticing?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

November 1 was a day of celebration. James woke at mid-day and saw that Lily was still out from the Dreamless Sleep. James walked to the nursery and saw his little bundles of energy were already up and wreaking havoc while a pair of ecstatic house elves looked on. James stopped to play with both of his sons for a few minutes before leaving to get something to eat.

He'd made a few decisions very early in the morning, decisions to protect his family, decisions that Albus Dumbledore would hate.

Sirius was already up and installed in the kitchen. It looked like a flour bomb had gone off all around Sirius.

"You know you can't cook...."

"I wanted to do something nice for you and Lily and my godsons."

James laughed. Nice was so not Sirius Black at this stage of his life.

"Hey!"

"You should have called for Dilsy. She's the kitchen elf. She'll scold us both for what you've done in here."

Dilsy did just that and thirty minutes later the kitchen was pristine and both men were stuffed.

"Did you decide?" Sirius asked.

"Family first, Sirius. Family."

Sirius nodded and seemed a bit sad. He'd long hated his particular family, save for his nutty cousin Andromeda, but he could understand James' impulse.

"We should get Remus over here. Maybe set up a little hunting party. Rat hunting...."

James shook his head. "I have something else planned for Peter. I'll be in the ritual chamber after I check on Lily."

Sirius looked shocked. "You'd do that to him?"

"Absolutely."

Sirius took a second and then snorted. "Family first."

An hour later, James locked himself in the central basement room and began the ritual to exact a severe magical punishment against a betrayer of the Potter Family. Five minutes later and Peter Pettigrew was a squib. He had enjoyed the hospitality of the Manor House and had later betrayed the family. The powerful family magics worked James' will. James only hoped that Peter was in his animagus form when he lost his magic. He'd be trapped as a rat for the rest of his life.

James left the ritual chamber and found Sirius playing with Christopher and Harry. James joined in with the play for an hour before he left to check on his wife. Lily was finally awake.

He took a few minutes to explain in broad strokes what had happened with Voldemort and with Dumbledore. When Lily immediately sided with Dumbledore's interpretation, James frowned. While James had grown disillusioned with the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Lily had grown more and more enamored of the old wizard.

"Lily, his Fidelius was worthless...."

"No, Peter was worthless."

"And Peter was approved as an Order member by Dumbledore's phoenix. Dumbledore has stated that it was a foolproof loyalty test. Foolproof, right. I'm not letting him have any control over the fate of the Potter Family going forward. Our last bit of trust almost cost all of us our lives."

Lily wanted to argue some more, but James told her to rest. "Is Christopher okay?"

"Both our sons are okay, Lily."

"But, Christopher wasn't hurt from what Voldemort did to him?"

"Go to sleep."

James left the room as his wife yelled after him. Lily was going to be a problem. But first he had Dumbledore to deal with.

When James went back downstairs, he saw that Remus had arrived. "Is it really true? Voldemort tried to attack?"

James nodded. Remus looked overwhelmed.

"How? The paper didn't say much...."

"Sirius, you, and I can discuss that. It's complicated."

"What did Dumbledore say?"

"That's what makes it complicated, Remus."

"Fine. Fine. Where are Chris and Harry?"

"With Sirius, I'd expect. I've been taking care of a few things. That reminds me, I need to call Frank Longbottom."

"Frank?"

"Yeah, I have some advice for him."

"Right," Remus said. He walked upstairs toward the nursery.

James needed to warn Frank about Dumbledore's 'excellent' wards. Who knew who could walk right into where Frank, Alice, and Neville were hiding out?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Dumbledore arrived as day turned to night. He'd never been inside the old hunting lodge on the Potter Estate. It was a very warm, large room. Still, he felt uncomfortable here inside wards he didn't control.

Particularly given his opponent of the evening.

James walked inside and gestured for Dumbledore to have a seat.

"Is Lily not joining us?" Dumbledore knew she was his strongest possible bulwark against James' pig-headedness.

"No, she's still feeling under the weather, Albus."

"I see." He looked over at the former Hogwarts Head Boy and wished things were easier to do. "Have you reconsidered my 'interpretation of events,' as you call it?"

"Yes. I consider it the worst possible thing you could say. The truth doesn't matter to people. There was no hero, no winner of an epic duel, no one who needs a medal. Best to let Voldemort seem like a moron who can't bring down a simple set of wards...."

"I disagree...." Suddenly Albus lost consciousness and slumped forward.

When he awoke, he discovered himself bound in a chair. His tongue felt an odd greasiness sliding around on it. Veritaserum. He cursed to himself and hoped that James – or whichever Death Eater was impersonating James – wouldn't know the right questions to ask.

"What wards did you cast on the Potter Cottage in Godric's Hollow?"

Albus gritted his teeth. That was one question he didn't want to answer. "The Fidelius Charm, a Dark Arts detection ward, a catastrophic failure warning ward, and a weak wizard repelling ward."

"Who was keyed to hold the Dark Arts and catastrophic failure wards?"

"I was."

"Why?"

"I wanted to know when they failed. I wanted to be the first on the scene."

The next question was slow in coming. Albus knew he was consigning himself to his death because of the hard truths he was being forced to reveal. Still, he couldn't stop. "Why were you so sure the wards would fail?"

"Wards cannot stop destiny. Voldemort knew he had to attack either you or the Longbottoms. Luckily Peter's betrayal made him come after you."

James obviously grimaced at Albus' choice to wording. 'Luckily' was probably a mistake to say. "What do you mean by destiny?" James asked.

"A prophecy...." Here Dumbledore tried to fight against the truth serum. But it didn't last. He gave away all his secrets concerning the prophecy. About the marking of a child, about a power that the Dark Lord wouldn't have, about a final confrontation to the death.

Dumbledore had his mind ransacked for a long time. He stopped noticing the questions. He only heard the answers he revealed.

"I suspected Peter Pettigrew after Fawkes developed a strong dislike for the young man...."

"I did not attempt to confirm if Pettigrew was our leak, not even after Benjy died. I needed information to get out to Voldemort, you understand. I needed Voldemort to keep fighting and not winning. I needed him to become careless enough to activate the prophecy."

"Yes, it was Severus who revealed the first lines of the prophecy before I asked him to join the Order. I could have stopped him that night, but I wanted the Dark Lord to know. I wanted the prophecy to have a chance to kick into effect."

"I know three of the Dark Lord's sympathizers among the Aurors. I suspect they're the ones who free the captured Death Eaters. Crouch has active battles to fight and he hasn't turned his attention to the perennially missing prisoners. Foolish, I think. I want them to have a second chance to turn away from evil which is the reason I

haven't destroyed their escape route. Voldemort, in my estimation, is truly the only one beyond redemption at this point."

"I suspected that either you and Lily or Frank and Alice would die, yes. But it was necessary. It seems that your destiny isn't completed yet, James."

"I would have placed Christopher in the Muggle world had you both died. I knew your aversion to Lily's sister, but it seemed like a viable alternative. As for Harry, he would have disappeared entirely. The superfluous do not matter when it comes to destiny."

"Lily became your girlfriend after I explained the realities of life as a muggleborn. I sat her down near the end of her sixth year and gave her the talk. She could score twelve 'O's on her NEWTs, but if she wasn't part of a well-respected family, she wouldn't go anywhere."

"I had thought Sirius the most likely traitor, even knowing about Fawkes' dislike of Pettigrew, which is why I encouraged Lily to have him selected...."

"I had a full set of plans for Black to go to Azkaban. Peace comes at a price, after all. The Child of Destiny needed to be safe in the Muggle world, not raised as a pureblood prince."

"I have the paperwork in my pocket for Lily to sign. I want to turn the other child over to someone else to raise now that you survived. Only Christopher Potter matters. He must be safe. He must be ready for when Voldemort comes. I'm the only one who can prepare him."

"I will wear you down, James, until you agree with my plots. I always win."

Albus heard the ragged breathing of his inquisitor. He'd given up almost all of his most important secrets related to the war and to the Potters. His mind was in pain like he hadn't felt in a long time.

Suddenly another voice came from behind him. "Ask him why he wanted to sacrifice me."

"Albus, why would you have been willing to sacrifice Sirius Black?"

"He was too independent, too unpredictable. He couldn't have been trusted, not with something as essential as the Child of Destiny."

"Tell me, Dumbledore, why I shouldn't kill you and incinerate your body right now?"

"You don't have it in you, James. I know you. You saved Severus Snape from a werewolf even though he was your enemy. You may hate me, but you won't kill me."

Even with the slurred nature of his truth-compelled speech, Dumbledore sounded smug. He wondered if he'd finally pushed his interrogator too far.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James had long known that the Potter Manor had a dungeon, with actual prison cells, but he never thought he'd need to use them. Now, he'd just placed Albus Dumbledore into a cell that only the Head of the Potter Family could enter and exit.

James had to think.

Dumbledore planned to throw his allies to their deaths in order to activate a prophecy...in order to salvage Death Eaters like Snape...in order to merely delay the eventual final death of Voldemort. He was obviously insane, but James and Sirius might be the only wizards in Britain to understand that now.

Dumbledore was magically powerful, insane, politically untouchable, the head of the supposedly independent judicial branch, and an utter arsehole. He couldn't trust the Ministry with any of this. Potters dealt with their own problems.

For now, Dumbledore would remain down here.

But the other major problem was upstairs in their bedroom. His wife, his opportunistic Lily. The woman he loved; the woman who loved his respectable family.

What to do?

James felt like his life was crumbling rather than starting anew. Voldemort was dead, but James could only think about how close he'd come to his death...because of Voldemort and Dumbledore.

And Lily's whispers in his ear.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James returned downstairs after dosing Lily with another Dreamless Sleep. Harry and Christopher were hobbling around as best they could on their shaky legs. James laughed and played with them as he pondered what Remus and Sirius might cook up.

James was supposed to be interrogating his wife, Dumbledore's unwitting accomplice inside the Potter family, but he couldn't bring himself to do it yet. He hated what she'd done, but he still loved his wife.

James stooped down and plucked up Harry from his attempt to crawl over Christopher.

"Oh, you little scamp. We'll have to teach you to crawl on Sirius. Maybe you can teach the old dog some new manners, eh?"

James ran his finger over the scar on Harry's forehead. "We'll have to look into getting this removed. But I didn't want to risk your safety in these early days. We'll let Mean Old Mr. Crouch round up the bad guys...."

Christopher wobbled over to James' chair and demanded to be picked up. His boys only knew about six words apiece, but they both used them with supreme clarity. James settled Harry onto one knee and picked up his son Christopher. Chris was free from any sort of visible blemish.

Based on what the prophecy said, the one Dumbledore had only shared under duress, it seemed obvious that Harry had been physically marked by Voldemort, not Christopher. It didn't matter, though. His sons were Potters; he loved them both.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Lily woke up, no longer in bed. She was upright, bound to a chair. "What's going on?" she called out.

She heard a shuffling noise and then someone – was it James? – appeared in front of her.

"Lily, you will answer my questions. Do you love your son Christopher?"

"Yes." She more than loved him. She treasured him above anything else.

"Do you love your son Harry?"

"I don't know." He wasn't the Child of Prophecy that Dumbledore had informed her of. He was part of her, but he wasn't important, was he?

"Do you love me?"

"No." Lily hesitated to enunciate the word, but she had to say it. James' face collapsed in pain.

"Why did you date me then?"

"Because I needed help and support. I had plans I couldn't accomplish on my own. You were from the oldest family still around, wealthy, smart, funny in a cruel sort of way, not so hard to look at. I tried to fall in love, but...."

It was going to be a long interrogation, Lily knew. Her safety in the wizarding world was gone. She was a sort of familial betrayer. James could kill her, if he wished to, and get off without punishment thanks to the archaic laws in place in this world. Albus had warned her of this...and she hadn't planned to be caught. She was truly trapped without a backup plan.

"Tell me everything you've ever been informed of by Albus Dumbledore that I did not also know."

Lily gulped. She would be talking for an hour.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Remus had come up with the main outline of the current plan. The Marauders had always worked well together, but this was the most daring thing they'd ever attempted: the figurative self-immolation of Albus Dumbledore.

Dumbledore had to fall on his own...or at least it had to look that way to the people who witnessed the event.

Sirius had added the details, but it was actually Lily's extensive little horde of potions notebooks and treatises which she had bought for the Potter Library that provided the main breakthrough. Liquid dementia.

James' contribution was the timing of the plan. Dumbledore had confessed two days ago. Two days hence the Wizengamot was convening for its first post-Voldemort session. Nothing could be a better platform for the gossip to immediately escape in every direction.

The very best detail, however, came from old Xenophilius Lovegood's new publication. The crazy things that man cooked up. Perfect.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James Potter settled into his seat on the Wizengamot, at the very right edge of the first row. His family was the oldest still intact so he had the first right to speak, a rather powerful privilege.

Today, he would use that power to deal with several problems.

The session began right on schedule. Minister Bagnold slid over into the Chief Warlock's seat when Albus didn't appear on time.

"The session has commenced. The order of progression is in front of each of you. Preliminary hearings of captured enemy forces...."

Here, old Griselda Marchbanks interrupted the proceedings. "Stop there, Millicent. There are only fourteen names listed on my sheet. I know very well that seventeen people have been apprehended so far."

Millicent almost snarled back a response. "Three of them have proved that they were under the Imperius Curse. The DMLE decided not to press charges...."

Another Wizengamot member, old Tillson, stood up. "It's our job to decide the truth of any situation. Get those three over here. We'll hear the charges and then decide what the evidence means."

"I issued pardons," Bagnold said, the words spilling from her mouth. She had obviously not intended to say that much. Those three words had just cost her her job, although she didn't know it yet. James Potter would ensure that Millicent Bagnold was gone within the month.

James said nothing during the preliminary hearings. Barty Crouch had sufficient evidence in every case. James was surprised that Crouch had allowed any of the Death Eaters to get away with a pardon. The old mad man would likely have 'accidentally' killed some of them just to ensure they didn't get off free.

The group moved through its business until a loud bang interrupted everything. Albus Dumbledore, dressed in mud-soaked green and purple robes, stumbled through into the room. Minister Bagnold looked shocked for a moment, then surrendered her seat back to Albus.

As the aged warlock stumbled closer, a horrid smell assaulted everyone's nose. He had obviously sweated out a dozen bottles of Firewhiskey in recent days without stopping to take a bath.

"I have come to make my final report on Voldemort's death," Albus slurred. "It's taken a great deal of time and much study. Powerful magics, rarely seen, of course.

"I have determined Voldemort was killed by heliopaths when he attacked the Potter home. Powerful, dangerous creatures of the sun. Surprising that they were out at midnight, but it must be true. As you know, heliopaths...."

Griselda Marchbanks stunned Dumbledore before he got into full rant. "I've long wondered if he was coming close to breaking. The pressures of the war. Then Voldemort dying without Dumbledore having a hand in it. Must have shattered his mind."

The discussion, distinctly off the agenda, swirled for another fifteen minutes before James Potter stood up.

"In light of all this, I must move to at least temporarily replace the Chief Warlock. Dumbledore has served us well, but now he obviously needs time to heal."

The group was unanimous in their support for the motion. Dumbledore had just lost half of his power.

The group eventually got back to its agenda after Dumbledore was removed to St. Mungo's. It gave James enough time to start his proxies on the second half of the Dumbledore problem: getting the old bag of bones out of Hogwarts altogether.

The closer the meeting came to the open portion of the agenda, the tenser James appeared. He wanted his fellow members to notice. He wanted the press to notice. He knew their eyes were already on him for his hinted role in Voldemort's demise...but now he had everyone's attention.

Minister Bagnold opened the meeting to new issues. James rose, along with several others. Given the rules of precedence, James spoke first.

"I have two issues to lay before this body. First, I nominate Luciette Depuy to serve as the Chief Witch of the Wizengamot while Albus recovers."

Reporters glinted with interest. Depuy wasn't a known Potter loyalist, nor was she a fan of Dumbledore. Her family was more neutral than even the Zabinis were. Considering who he had to choose from, it was the best option James had to ensure that neither Dumbledore's philosophy, through a disciple, nor a Death Eater took control of the Wizengamot.

Depuy also happened to be a particularly beautiful witch even in her 70s. She had many friends and admirers among the body. No one else rose to present any other names. Depuy took the chair, the shock of being nominated by James Potter still writ large on her face. She could only recount speaking with the man four or five times since he'd taken over the Potter seat.

"Thank you. I believe Mr. Potter still has the floor." She nodded to him with an odd smile on her face.

"Thank you. I would like to make a public report on the attack that occurred at my cottage in Godric's Hollow on October 31. As much as the end results were a cause for celebration, I have a sad truth to reveal...." The room had become almost completely silent. People had been waiting for the official story for some time now.

"Voldemort learned of my family's location from a former friend of mine named Peter Pettigrew. When he arrived in Godric's Hollow, he encountered a weak wizard repelling ward and a series of obscure but powerful wards cast by Albus Dumbledore. While he was attempting to break those wards, he was overpowered by them. It happens frequently to people who aren't trained cursebreakers. There were only four wards to deal with but they were tied into massive magical reservoirs. He perished, as you all know, leaving only his broken wand and cloak behind."

Here James turned on a small touch of the water works. He had to be convincing. "The sad part of the story is that my wife, Lily Evans Potter, was downstairs in the basement at the time working in her Potions chamber. She felt the attack begin and left the safety of that warded room. Just as Voldemort caused the magical overload, Lily passed near the ward stone. She was hit with a massive discharge of energy, one large enough that it burned out the ward stone entirely. At the time, I thought she had just injured her head, as she'd been thrown against a table. So I fed her healing potions she'd brewed herself. We noticed the true problem three days ago." He paused for a moment, letting the vultures lick their chops. "Lily's wand no longer worked for her. Whatever that discharge was rendered my wife a squib." The gasps through the room were loud. Aside from death or bodily assault, it was the worst thing any witch or wizard could imagine. "My sons, Christopher and Harry, were safe and remain very healthy...even overactive. My wife has gone into seclusion and we plan to seek out the services of a variety of Healers to determine if there is anything we can do to restore her ability to perform magic. At this time, that is all I know about what happened. Thank you."

James sat down and kept his face neutral as the chaos washed through the room. He felt no guilt at the lie he'd substituted for the

truth – or the fact that he'd stripped his traitorous wife of her magic. She was currently in a small cottage in Brittany. She would never be seen publicly again.

An hour later the meeting ended. James ducked away from the reporters and apparated back to the Potter Manor. He stripped off his ceremonial robes and went to find his sons.

He was glad that Dumbledore had begun his descent...but he was still Headmaster. And three Death Eaters had pardons for their crimes. The more James did, the more there was to be done.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James, Sirius, and Remus took three days to come up with this solution to one set of their current problems.

"Master Goblin," James began as he sat inside the ornate office.

"Please, Mr. Potter, call me Ragnok."

"Ragnok, I have come on a matter of mutual interest and, perhaps, profit to both our worlds."

"Speak."

"I would have the certified banking records of these seven Death Eaters who have managed to escape prosecution in the last three weeks. I believe they have corrupted members of the Ministry. I will also need records for some members of the Wizengamot and other Ministry officials."

"This is a wizarding matter, Mr. Potter. Goblins care not for how the wizards spend their gold...."

"I suspected you might say such a thing, Ragnok. I am prepared to destroy the reputation of Gringotts immediately if you do not aid me in this endeavor."

"What foolish prattle is this?"

"You will arrange for certified copies of banking records to reach these five members of the Wizengamot – for this list of families,

including these suspects within the Ministry, yes, including Bagnold herself – or else I will publicly state that I have withdrawn the Potter fortune from Gringotts because of your support of Voldemort in...."

"That's outrageous. We supported no one."

James smiled a feral grin. "So you didn't open a secret entrance for people who couldn't enter through the front door? Or create a special class of vaults with their own track? Or permit obviously plundered items to be sold through Gringotts intermediaries in the Muggle world?"

Ragnok growled.

"You will not live to get your wealth from your vault...."

"Vaults. I've emptied the Potter vault, the Gryffindor vault, what little was left in the Peverell vault.... Do I need to continue? I will ruin you once wizards know that your vaunted neutrality has been a lie for years."

"You won't leave this room alive." Ragnok pressed a rune on his desk. Surprisingly it did nothing.

"I think you're mistaken. The story is already in the hands of three wizarding publications. Only I can retract it. And you can't call your guards to kill me since I know how your wards function. You have fifteen minutes to decide, Master Goblin. The airborne poison I used affects only goblins. After fifteen minutes there is no cure."

Instead of growling, Ragnok seemed to chuckle. "That is...brutal, wizard. You seem to have understood goblin negotiations."

"I understand that guilty witches and wizards escaped punishment. I do what it takes."

"We may be able to deal, but you will never be able to set foot again into Gringotts."

"I knew that before I came inside your office."

"What do you offer then? The goblins of Gringotts care not whether one goblin dies or not. My death would mean little to them. They

would tear up any agreement we make if I die – or if the rewards aren't worth the risk."

"I will kill Gringotts in the minds of witches and wizards...."

"A threat is nothing if you hesitate to carry it out. You mentioned mutual profit?"

Here James smiled. He knew he'd won this phase of the negotiations. "You own up to your support of Voldemort, execute the collaborators, and then help the Ministry enforce the Traitors Act of 1312...."

"I do not know it."

"It's been enforced rarely. It states that the members of a recognized insurrection forfeit their lands and wealth once the insurrection is put down. How else do you keep wizards from rioting every other day? Cowards refuse to enforce it, but I will negotiate with them."

"Ahh, I remember. Gringotts gets a ten percent finder's fee?"

James nodded.

"It will be a great profit. The innocent family members of the traitorous goblins will have some solace."

"I suspect it would be you yourself who would identify the traitorous elements within Gringotts.... Perhaps some of your political enemies will find their names on the list."

Ragnok displayed row after row of sharpened teeth. "The thought had occurred to me."

"I would like to see the files before I release you. Start with Lucius Malfoy, his father Abraxus, and any related vaults."

The goblin opened his bottom desk drawer. "Magical ledger. Take your time, but remember about the poison...."

"Top of my mind." James took the ledger and scanned the last few months worth of entries. Lucius had paid out some hefty sums. Some went to benign organizations, like St. Mungo's. Some went to

organizations James had never heard of, such as the Blood Research Fund. But the bulk of the larger transfers went to other vaults: Bagnold, Fudge, Wilkins (rumored Head Unspeakable), sixteen members of the Wizengamot, seven people who worked underneath Crouch in the DMLE (but not Crouch himself)....

"This is a start."

"The antidote," Rangok insisted.

"We're not done negotiating." James found the goblin became more agreeable the closer they came to the end of the deadline.

"What?"

"The manner in which the records reach the select Wizengamot members. They must be certified, but it must look like someone managed to steal the records from the wizards themselves. Or some sort of clerical mishap. Do you have a method to make that happen?"

"We could mail them with specially trained owls. The address on the envelope would be correct, but the owl would dump them elsewhere...."

James nodded. It was as good an idea as he'd heard for this particular problem.

He reached into his cloak and pulled out a small vial. He passed it to the relatively new Director of Gringotts. "I should warn you, this isn't enough to cure you. Tomorrow, after the records go out, I will send an owl with the larger dose. I wouldn't want you to be tempted into betraying me, would I?"

Ragnok snatched the vial and drank it.

"You have another twenty or so hours. Be fast if you want to live."

James waved his wand and tore down his wards, the ones for privacy, the ones to inhibit goblin runes, the ones to keep the door from breaking under any sort of physical attack.

"Good negotiating, Mr. Potter."

"I hope we don't have to do it again. Keep this conversation to yourself, eh?"

The goblin bowed. One didn't reach the Directorship by being beaten in negotiations very often. He could hate and respect the wizard who'd bested him without a second thought.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius made more of a mess eating breakfast than Christopher and Harry did. But James hadn't kicked him or Remus out of Potter Manor yet. He needed friends. He needed people he could plot with.

Remus walked into the room with a copy of the Daily Prophet. "It worked. Bagnold is in a cell next to Malfoy, I'm sure. The Ministry is in turmoil. I'd expect you'll be busy sorting out your secret actions in the Wizengamot very soon."

James smiled and nodded.

"What do we do if that dementia potion ever wears off of Albus? St. Mungo's would release him. He might even be able to petition his way back into Hogwarts," Sirius said.

Remus shook his head twice. "The thing causes major brain damage. A few wizards got the idea after seeing some elderly muggles who'd lost their mind. They wanted to be able to reproduce the condition to see if they could cure it. They discovered how to create it, but not how to fix it."

James ate some more eggs but stopped midway through. "I can't help but wonder if that blasted prophecy could be true...."

Remus shrugged. "If it is, we prepare."

"The Marauders ousted Dumbledore, surely we can defeat a silly prophecy," Sirius added, as he was pelted with a piece of soggy toast thrown by Christopher Potter.

"Be careful, little man, I can throw faster than you...." This time, a bit from Harry hit Sirius on his cheek and stuck. "Gross."

James and Remus began to laugh. Christopher and Harry continued eating some and throwing some of their food. It took Dilsy the kitchen elf throwing a fit to break up the little party.

Later on, James returned to thinking about the future. What could he do? Things were safe and settled for now...but in the future?

He didn't know how, but he would be ready. He would make sure Christopher and Harry were both fully prepared.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: Having just finished this, I think it might be the best setup of any story I've yet written. I'm not sure I want to try to fill in what comes next. Anything I could think up would likely be a let down.

Someone asked why Lily agreed with Dumbledore to a plan that would have cost her her life. Who says that Dumbledore told her the entire truth of his plan? (He's one of those enigmas cloaked in a riddle wrapped up in a puzzle; never seems to give a straight answer, does he?) Or that she wasn't such a fanatic by that point that she wouldn't agree to martyr herself for the fame and power she so seems to desire as a muggleborn in a pureblood world. As for why Harry survived without Lily dying, the canon explanation of Lily sacrificing her life for her son is also entirely unsatisfactory. I put it down to fate/destiny saving Harry and Christopher (in this story and in canon).

As for why James let Dumbledore escape with 'only' dementia, there is actually a good reason which I only sort of hinted to it in the story. (The dementia, of course, also helps to destroy Albus' ability to even remember that he has magic at his disposal.)

The way I conceive of the familial betrayer is that it has to be a close friend or family member, someone who would often accept houseroom inside the Potter Manor. Lily and Pettigrew often stayed over; Dumbledore, as a security conscious old coot, never would. The family magics James appealed to would consider Lily and Peter as betrayers because of their continual visits to the Manor and such, but not Dumbledore.

And, Action!

A/N: The conclusion of the Azkaban storyline. Someone thought it strange that Harry would come back to finish off Voldemort. So, aside from the stated reason in the last chapter that Harry wanted to close off this bad chapter in his life (along with it never being a good idea to leave an enemy alive and plotting), I thought up a strange and amusing explanation for Harry's behavior. Someone please tell me if you've ever seen this rationale before; I'll be shocked. Enjoy!

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Harry went back to his small headquarters near Calais. He plucked up his communication mirror and called Remus.

"Well?" Remus had sketched out the plan for bringing down Azkaban. The proud papa wanted to hear how well his idea had fared.

"It went well. It's in the ground as we speak. It's ready for the moment we need it."

"Did you test out all the devices?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I just used the sound disruptors. I didn't want to risk damaging anything else with the sound waves bouncing here and there. I'll test out the rest of the equipment with the next scene of our little drama."

Remus laughed and rolled his eyes. "Fine, fine. I'm unpacking all that Muggle equipment you bought. It's enough to fill a room. Are you sure we need so much?"

"Stop moaning, Remus. The safehouse has nine rooms. I think you can spare one for my little project." Harry knew Remus wanted that equipment more than Harry did. It was a bit of a running joke.

"Just a reminder, I don't know electronics at all. Remember, I grew up in the magical world...."

"If you can follow a sheet of directions, you can do this. I'll start sending you results from our tests pretty soon."

"Good. Be safe, right?"

"Never anything else," Harry said.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry had all of his gadgets and devices prepared in his Calais safe house. He had also spread a lot of money around certain parties in Paris to get some advanced notice of any European or American attacks on Britain. He had a bit of a plan in mind.

The good word finally came on a Tuesday. By Wednesday evening, Harry had set up for the first bit of danger he expected in his battle. He'd have to set foot on mainland Britain for the first time in a decade.

The Americans would be attacking a rumored Death Eater training facility in Kent. Harry tipped well for the information and made his plans for Hogsmeade. The Auror Detachment building there was a perfect target. The Americans would draw off the bulk of the forces, so it would be an easy (but not completely foolproof or safe) first target for many of Harry's devices.

Harry waited for the American attack to begin (he'd sent off special magical cameras to record the likely scene of attack) before he apparated with his devices to Hogsmeade.

First up, nine floating orbs which a Disillusioned Harry scattered carefully throughout the town and next to the Auror Substation. Next, a Disillusioned set of three boxes which Harry tucked in next to the east, west, and north faces of the Auror building. Finally, Harry stalked up to a hill overlooking Hogsmeade and used his wand to turn everything on.

The north box exploded and a massive fireball lit up the night sky. A major portion of the building was destroyed, another third was on fire. A few second later, the remaining Aurors poured into the darkened street in front of the building.

The second box, the one on the east-facing, or street facing, wall detonated. Instead of a fireball, though, a massive purple spectral dragon soared into the air. Voldemort's Aurors began casting spells wildly trying to knock the thing out of the sky. The dragon solidified

as it turned around and descended toward the ground. It plowed into a half dozen of the aurors and split them in half.

The final hidden bomb went off. Everything for three square blocks ceased to exist. No hole, no smoldering, no bodies. Nothing.

Harry looked satisfied at the results of this first test. The three bombs seemed to work as he'd designed them. The purple dragon had been especially impressive. It would strike fear in the hearts of everyone who saw it.

Harry quickly walked back and collected up the floating orbs he'd left in Hogsmeade. Remus would be most excited to see how the orbs worked. Remus, after all, had designed the tricky little things.

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Remus watched the images captured in his orbs. The footage was truly phenomenal.

"It's a go, Harry," he said into his mirror. "It's all golden. I'll start getting the nine orbs transferred over to Muggle film, right?"

Harry nodded. "You sure you don't want to come and see some of this with your own eyes?"

"The crap the orbs showed me had me scared as it is. I don't know if my old heart could take the excitement."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You're not old, wolfie. You're just happier close to a library. You stay there and get our project rolling. I'll do the real work."

"Hey, an editor does real work."

"Get to work, then. I have another scene to shoot."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry called in a major favor from a former teacher in China. The man grudgingly agreed to pass Harry one important piece of information: the date of the next coordinated strikes from China via long distance magical weapons.

Muggles had long attributed China's millennia-long tradition of being unconquered by invading hordes to its geography or later to its Great Wall. Harry had discovered the fuller picture of the story: magical styles that allowed Chinese sorcerers to cast spells and hit targets dozens or hundreds or thousands of miles away.

Harry had been unable to learn these techniques himself, as they were now tightly regulated Chinese secrets, but he had made contact with several people in the know about China's magical defense capabilities.

Scene two was scheduled for later in the evening when the Chinese launched a devastating set of attacks.

The Chinese were aiming their attacks toward Voldemort's likely seat of power, a reputedly abandoned ruin known as Marhaveren Castle. Of course, it looked ruined only to muggles. It had been Salazar Slytherin's seat of power after he'd been driven from Hogwarts.

Voldemort was nothing if not invested in symbolism.

The attacks began at nine twenty. Harry apparated into London with a new collection of gadgets at a little before ten.

The street was deserted. Harry looked up and saw that the building that held his interest had no lights visible. Good; he didn't want a lot of collateral damage if he could help it.

The problem with this particular scene was that almost everything that was about to happen would be underground. Harry had decided to modify his script to make the evil overlord's headquarters inside the innocuous building. If ten unknown levels of basement underneath the building happened to get crushed in the process...oh well.

Still, Harry wanted some shots of the interior of the British Ministry of Magic as it collapsed in on itself. He dispatched fifty of the floating orbs. The whole building, inside and out, was covered from a variety of angles.

Harry bent down and removed a series of small cylinders, somewhat reminiscent of old muggle-style dynamite sticks.

He levitated himself up the side of the building and affixed one stick to each floor.

Harry then flew over to a building three blocks away and stood on the roof. He didn't have a great view of the proceedings, but it was safer this way. The explosives Harry had designed – partially from a Cascading Potion, partially from a rune-inscribed casing, and partially from a few charms cast on the potion – were supposed to look like some of the more common special effects in American movies. Harry had chosen this round to look like stars exploding with massive rings of outward detonation.

He pulled out his wand. Seconds later the orbs recorded a most beautiful sight.

Harry shielded his eyes as the top-most floor exploded as if a miniature star had died. The waves of destruction continued downward faster than gravity could pull the ruins down. In less than a second the entire building was destroyed and hundreds of tons of rubble collapsed the floors that the Ministry of Magic had carved out for itself decades earlier.

Harry let the orbs continue filming as the dust clouds were incredibly beautiful to watch. Finally, he summoned back the ones that survived the detonation. All the ones underground had been crushed; but the images were stored back in Harry's Calais headquarters.

He apparated away twelve minutes before the first muggles showed up on the scene. Very sloppy of them. Wizards took even longer to recognize that the center of their government was gone.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The next setup took a while. Harry had spent a nine month training session with some rather sketchy people from Singapore just to learn the skills to develop these devices. But ensuring they were powerful enough for their current task was the current issue.

Harry had visited close to thirty wizarding manors throughout the British countryside. He'd tested the wards of each one. Four of them possessed particularly powerful configurations.

Ward busters were illegal in every wizarding nation, although most of their armies or police forces kept a small number in case of emergency. No one, not even the wizarding mafia lords operating across the world, had thirty-plus devices on hand. Harry, at the present, was a power unto himself.

His use for the devices? Mass destruction that led to mass entertainment.

Along with his thirty ward busters, he'd put together thirty two different bombs. Some were spectral dragons, like he'd used on that Auror Substation, others were even more fantastical. One was terribly experimental and would turn a house into a volcanic outlet for several hours. Harry crossed his fingers regarding that device. It would either work wonderfully or be a complete failure.

On a dark Sunday evening, Harry spent two hours setting everything up. Each targeted Manor received between three and seven floating orbs. Harry returned to Calais to watch everything on his viewing screens. He hoped, with the timing he'd settled on, to inflict some financial and personnel damage to Voldemort's regime. Still, he didn't want to kill too many. He needed the bulk of Voldemort's forces for the final, epic battle.

Harry turned the viewers to the first home of the evening, the rather lovely Gothic-influenced Lestrange Manor. Harry cast a spell with his wand and the ward buster began its work. The results on screen were extraordinary. The wards surrounding the massive ancestral building flared and glowed with a dozen different colors. They twisted and curved as the ward buster drained and released the energy powering the ancient pieces of magic.

After a full five minutes of a dazzling light show, Harry was able to activate the second element of the show. The 'bomb' he'd left behind near the ward buster detonated and powered up a giant flaming sword that proceeded to hack the Manor into pieces. When the magical sword exploded, nearly every square meter within a kilometer caught fire.

He'd decided on a red color to symbolize an attack by the story's main villain. This particular destruction sequence would be near the beginning of the movie to show the main villain's early rise to power.

Harry worked through the night and early morning (as he wanted some daylight scenes, too) remotely destroying wards and activating a vast array of different magical bomb. One comic scene had a flaming orange unicorn prancing through the Crouch Manor destroying the massive hedge maze that had been in the family for decades.

The finale, done during the early morning, was the best thing Harry had ever created. He'd left three bombs at the largest of the thirty estates, the Malfoy Manor, and now he tripped the spells to activate them.

He'd decide to include a battle of proxies. The main villain would be attacked by his former chief lieutenant and also by what remained of the mostly destroyed opposition force. The villain's burning red hellhound would do battle with an ice blue firebird and a golden shark that floated in the air.

The rampaging battle conducted over, inside, and through the Malfoy Mansion was a beauty to film. It took over eight minutes for the hell hound to succumb to the other two attackers, just as the script called for. Magic really was incredible.

Harry streamed off the footage so Remus could get to work on it and then went to bed. Some of the scenes hadn't really worked, such as the abortive volcano. Others were perfect. Harry would just get some actors in front of a blue screen and then they could shove the battle into the footage of the various Manor houses being razed.

Easy as pie. Cheap location work; spectacular special effects for little or no money. Hollywood would never learn Harry's secrets.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry had dithered about whether to film the part of the script that featured the destruction of an old castle...one that looked identical Hogwarts. The story wouldn't suffer without the footage, but Harry just couldn't make up his mind.

Finally, he decided to press on without it. His movie was going to be over two and a half hours as it was.

He was now onto the final scene: the epic battle.

Well, it was a series of things he needed to pull together. First, he needed to call out Voldemort. He'd decided on the best way possible: an illusion playing out over Hogsmeade.

Later that evening, Harry finished his preparations out at Azkaban for the final scene. He apparated to Hogsmeade and set a small device in the burned out ruins of the Auror Substation.

Come nine thirty the next night, the little device would click on and Voldemort and Britain at large would catch their first glimpse of Harry Potter in a very long time.

The old wizard would be livid beyond belief, livid beyond reason or rational thought. He'd be told to come alone, so of course he'd bring everyone he could find.

Harry laughed when he went to his bedroom. What a life!

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Voldemort arrived in Hogsmeade and his blood red eyes opened wide as he saw a three hundred foot tall Harry Potter in the center of town mocking Voldemort.

"Tom Riddle, Baby Killer, hides behind his Death Eaters and refuses to fight me one-on one. Of course, a half blood upstart like him probably couldn't fight a fair fight if his immortality depended upon it. Son of a Muggle and a deranged squib, what could you expect from Voldemort. But, should he be wizard enough to battle me, I will arrive at my former home, Azkaban Prison, at midnight. Tom arranged to put me there, so I think it's only fitting we end things there, as well..."

The message paused for a moment and began to repeat.

"Blast it out of the sky," Voldemort yelled. The range and intensity of colors was stunning, but it did nothing to the massive Harry Potter looming over Hogsmeade.

Thirty minutes later and it was still taunting Voldemort. He stalked over to a Death Eater and pressed his wand into the man's Dark Mark. He pivoted to look at an Auror. "Summon everyone. We'll be going to Azkaban. Perhaps it was Potter that entrapped everyone weeks ago. We'll force him to release our comrades before I slaughter him...."

Twenty minutes before midnight, Voldemort and his force of three hundred twenty wizards arrived on Azkaban Island.

Voldemort didn't feel or notice the first few spells cast in the final battle...but eventually he noticed the roiling of the water surrounding the island.

His Death Eaters moved toward the water which seemed as if it were boiling. Then suddenly, from every direction, odd monstrosities rose up and walked upon the sandy beach. Some looked like mermen with legs; others looked like centaurs with gills; still others resembled massive crabs with fiery pincers; the last variety resembled massive water snakes with foot-long fangs.

It was straight out of a child's nightmare, this phantasmagoric horror.

Voldemort leveled his wand and began cursing. The reductor he sent did nothing, didn't even pause the thing. The severing curse bounced off and hit one of his Death Eaters. Finally, Voldemort went for the biggest gun he had. "Avada Kedavra."

The creature keeled over. A second later, it turned back into a pile of sand.

"Killing Curses now...."

Green light filled the air. The problem was that no one could maintain enough of these curses to stop the coming onslaught. An average witch or wizard could cast two or three Killing Curses an hour without any risk of magical exhaustion. When someone started doing two or three per minute, they'd exhaust their store of magical reserves within minutes.

No one, save Harry Potter who was watching all this from a safe position, seemed to recognize the problem with Voldemort's order. Harry, however, had counted on it.

It made for a spectacular light show.

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The Death Eaters began collapsing after five minutes. Voldemort was still going strong, but he had access to more magic than most. After another dozen keeled over unconscious almost as a group, Voldemort realized his error.

"Stop casting. Start shielding. Try banishing. Save your magic."

There were two hundred odd Death Eaters still conscious. There were more than three thousand vicious creatures at least partially emerged from the ocean. Their odds were very poor.

Then the battle took a different turn; it somehow managed to worsen.

A huge image of a young man, not Potter, but equally impressive in stature, appeared over and behind Azkaban Castle. Its mouth moved, but Voldemort couldn't hear anything. Then suddenly the image kicked at Azkaban Castle and the entire thing exploded. Huge chunks of rock flew up into the air, hundreds of massive stones began to rain down on the Death Eaters. Within a second, there were fewer than three dozen people still alive on the field of battle. Every place was thick with blood and gore. Voldemort took to the air and was clipped twice by stones. He was bleeding, but was safe for the moment.

He clutched at his special portkey, but it didn't activate. He tried a dangerous mid-air apparition...but he remained firmly in place.

He finally realized the extent of the trap laid for him in this place. He was forced to watch as wave after wave of those sea creatures continued devastating his few remaining supporters.

Then the massive image that had destroyed Azkaban with just a kick of its foot turned toward Voldemort.

It pointed its finger toward the dark wizard. Voldemort wanted to flee, but he was already up against some form of an invisible barrier. From the giant man's finger tip a ball of purple fire began to glow. Within seconds the glow had turned into a massive, ethereal dragon.

"What magic is this?" he mouthed to himself. He had never seen anything like this display of magic. Could Potter really be this powerful? Conjuring hundreds or thousands of soldiers; massive giants; dragons made from energy....

The purple dragons swooped toward Voldemort and clutched the evil wizard in its evanescent claws. Voldemort screamed in pain as the vile beast tore through flesh and bone and blood.

The magical claws eventually tore clear through Voldemort and he slipped from the dragon's grasp, falling, falling, falling toward the hardened earth of Azkaban Island. He landed as a crumpled mess of bone and flesh. Dead. His black wraith-like spirit erupted from his destroyed body and fled through the magical barrier. It couldn't stop a soul from penetrating its protections.

Harry smiled. At the scene of devastation, a masterpiece of planning and execution. The floating orbs had caught everything.

He pulled out his wand and stopped the transfiguration engines he'd thrown out in the sea. He began dispelling the remaining brainless monsters. The illusion of an attractive but indistinct hero vanished as well. Harry still needed to cast that role in his movie, but Remus or whoever they hired to deal with some of the effects issues could insert a new face easy enough.

"And that's a wrap, boys." Harry laughed at his silly little joke. All the 'extras' in the film had died, save for the little soul fragment that escaped...which is what Harry had planned to have happen. At least three of the orbs had caught that bit very clearly, which would ensure Harry could hint about a forthcoming sequel.

Assuming this movie did well after Harry finished it, he'd come back, ensure Voldemort got a new body, and shoot the sequel in three or four years. Harry had outlined a four movie arc so far...but if Voldemort kept cooperating every time he died, then perhaps it could go on a bit longer than that.

Remus already had a rough cut of the major action scenes (which they would use to convince their choice of actors and actresses to join the production), he just needed the grand finale. Within four weeks, Harry could be shooting the real speaking roles in his movie.

Harry cleaned up the site as much as he intended to, then apparated back to Calais. He had already purchased his headquarters for the eventual follow-on films he planned to make. Surely Voldemort could find enough purebloods to serve as adequate 'extras' for future projects. That's what Voldemort lived to do, wasn't it?

Harry streamed off the footage and then mirror called Remus.

"All finished?"

"Absolutely. It was beautiful. Everything went to plan. First take, of course."

Remus laughed. "No one will have ever seen anything like this. The 'special effects' we've got are easily worth a hundred million dollars if the muggles tried to reproduce what we've done...."

"Titanic will do a few hundred million at the box office. What do you think we'll manage?"

"Depends on how good of actors we can get. I was thinking Alan Rickman for our villain, Vidor Cross."

"I'm more partial to Ian McKellen," Harry said. "I liked him in Richard III."

"Either would be great," Remus agreed. "As for the young hero, Bilbray, we should go for an attractive unknown, I think. Open casting call; let the buzz ripple through Hollywood. Some unknown director/producer has put together a huge budget picture without studio financing. We'll let some clips leak out, stuff no one's ever seen. Word of mouth will get us where we want...."

"You're the marketing genius, Remus. Too bad your fake identities will get credits for the film. Barken will be the editor; Cain McManus will be a producer. No one can ever know that Remus Lupin is making muggle movies."

"Or you, Harry. Writer, producer, director. Which nom de plume will you choose?"

"I've decided upon John Patience O'Ryan, the last name is close enough to Sirius' middle name, Orion, to be a bit of a tribute, eh?"

"Sounds goods to me. Still, even if this hits big, we'll both need to be famously reclusive about the whole thing...."

"Thank Merlin, I hate the media." Harry turned to the next topic on his mind. "Have you thought about the next film? I have a few million galleons left I could use to get another movie started."

"How about that Dark Lady from Japan who tried to kill you? She has lots of minions and a magical boat the size of a small city. You could write a fabulous story around that...."

Harry nodded. "I like it. I already have a couple ideas. But it'll have to wait until tomorrow. I'm exhausted. I'll pack everything up and return to the safe house tomorrow. We'll need to get busy editing, I think. Then we need to give a few casting directors a few phone calls...."

"I think the dwarf will be the hardest to cast. You and I both know what dwarves look like, but Hollywood always gets it wrong."

"It'll be tough. I'll talk with you tomorrow."

"Oh, do you have a title yet?"

"I'm staying with the one on the script so far. Agathanthus Deep...."

"That's terrible. I'll start considering it."

"Night," Harry said before turning off his mirror. His return to Britain had been fun and very productive.

Fourteen months to the day, Harry would see his film, *The Betrayed*, open at number one in the American cinema market. By the end of its cinematic run, Harry's debut picture would earn two hundred thirteen million dollars domestically and another one hundred eighty million dollars in foreign sales. Considering Harry did a distribution-

only deal with Sony Pictures, he and Remus kept the bulk of the revenues. For a film that cost a bit over six million dollars to make (mostly going to the handful of actors needed to carry along the plot and for a set that was nothing more than a warehouse with a large blue screen erected inside it), it was a fantastic return on investment.

It also helped the poor young man sleep better at night. His memories of Azkaban began to fade dramatically. He'd exorcised that demon well and good. Blowing up a nemesis was, of course, a good form of therapy.

Still, he had a challenge staying out of the limelight. His habits were the only thing that saved him. He only popped over to Hollywood when he had a meeting to attend. Neither he nor Remus ever 'did lunch.' Neither one had an agent or a manager or a publicist. Neither one had a telephone. Neither read scripts or agreed to work on projects with outsiders or to accept financing from anyone. They were available only through letters sent to a mail drop in New York City – a mail drop staked out by interested paparazzi and a few private investigators, but no one ever saw the director John O'Ryan pick up his mail or even go near the box his mail was delivered to.

It got worse after two of Remus' aliases won Academy Awards for visual effects related categories. People were desperate to figure out who'd made this insane, intense film that was so realistic no one could figure out how the effects were achieved. It boggled the mind.

Still, Harry and Remus retained their privacy.

After all, Dog Star Magic (Harry and Remus' production company) was based out of an unassuming home on the outskirts of Kansas City, Missouri. (Wizards of Harry's caliber didn't need to go to New York to pick up their mail, did they?) They did the bulk of the special effects themselves, once they'd pioneered a bit of magic appropriate for the task.

The actors were merely spliced into the epic sequences, scenes so shocking that every professional wished they could have been involved. No one in the movie business, save for a few actors and two cameramen, ever owned up to working on an O'Ryan picture...thereby increasing the mystique. Critics hated the movies, but their second film did over six hundred million in combined theatrical receipts. A legend was born.

Harry and Remus did all the heavy lifting. Who needed Industrial Light and Magic when you had the real thing?

Voldemort, of course, inadvertently came back to reprise his starring role in The Betrayed 2: Ever Falls, The Betrayed 3: Infinity Beckons, and The Betrayed 4: Redounding Collapse (Tom Marvolo Riddle received credit as the lead stunt man for all four films). Strangely enough, Voldemort's spirit did not attempt to find a new body after that film, so Harry and Remus continued developing new projects across the world.

They averaged a new project every year. Stupid witches and wizards obliged the duo by providing powerful dark wizards and witches each equipped with hundreds of followers. Morocco; Guatemala; Russia (twice); the Balkans; the Falkland Islands (what an odd witch she had been); Myanmar; the Dominican Republic; Qatar; Bulgaria; and many, many other exotic locations.

It was a happy, profitable life.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A Father's Love, Part 2

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James crumpled the letter in his hand and frowned. Lily's weekly plea contained a twist on her usual demands.

She still wanted to leave her cottage. She still wanted better food. She still wanted to be able to write anyone she chose. But, she now also wanted to see Christopher. What she didn't want to say was her reasoning.

James suspected it was to tell her son she was dying and that her husband had stolen her magic.

"Cilly," James said summoning the elf who'd made the most recent delivery to Lily.

The elf popped into the room. "Yes, Master James?"

"How did Lily look when you saw her?"

"Thin, pale. The trash I removed was filled with bloody rags."

James sighed. "The loss of her magic is killing her, then? And she won't tell me that...she makes me puzzle it out for myself. I will send a Healer after I ensure Lily can't speak during the treatment."

James knew what was happening to Lily as the Aurors had come across Peter Pettigrew's body a few months earlier. Magical bodies grew too dependent on magic to survive without it.

He pulled a vial from a rack of potions he kept in his study – this one specifically for what he'd expected to happen with Lily. He then sat down and drafted a brief letter. "Please take this potion as it will ease your pain. I will send a Healer to you later this afternoon. Be honest if you expect the same in return. –Potter."

The little elf took the vial and the note and disappeared. Cilly wouldn't return until she'd witnessed Lily drinking the vial. James wouldn't send for a Healer until Cilly returned.

He had never regretted his choice after he'd discovered Lily's simpleminded betrayal of the family she'd married into. He did not regret that Dumbledore was still insane locked in one of the more unknown basement wards of St. Mungo's (for the potential violent and insane). He did not regret standing up for the Potter Family – and winning.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James went to the kitchen for lunch. The Potter Mansion was a truly Ancient Seat, but James preferred informality. There was a beautiful old wooden table where he, his sons, and whatever guests they had normally ate their meals. The formal Dining Hall was used at most once a month for large gatherings or formal parties.

Today, James looked forward to lessons after his sandwich and soup. Potters were wealthy but lived simple lives, like their forbearers. James sat down and then heard some thundering on the stairs leading up from the rear gardens. His demolition duo had finally decided to put down their spades in the garden and come in for some food.

Christopher and Harry enjoyed gardening, to an extent, but they delighted in using water and dirt to make massive earthen castles. After ruining a few choice spots of the Potter Gardens in their earlier years, James had cleared out a space just for their mock battles conducted in the dirt.

It had been a passion of his sons that James had exploited. Most children hate to learn history of any sort, but James had taught them bits and pieces of wizarding and muggle history as it related to their wars. Some days Christopher would create a goblin fortress; other days, Harry would be on the losing side as he played the French at Agincourt.

Harry went to wash his hands while Christopher tried to sit at the table. James raised an eyebrow. Christopher sighed and went to wash up. Dilsy was serving good food; not ham and dirt sandwiches.

The three of them ate in companionable silence. James could see that Harry had some questions while Christopher looked like he wanted to go out and continue building fortifications.

James wiped his mouth and chin and then looked at Harry. "You have a question?"

"Yes, is Uncle Sirius coming tonight?"

"I believe he is. But it's also a full moon, so Remus will be unable to join us for a few days."

Harry nodded. Christopher wasn't really listening. Instead, he was chasing his crackers around in his soup as if they were boats at a battle.

"I wondered if we'd get to play on our brooms again if Sirius is here."

James had to suppress a smile at the question. Harry was asking for Christopher – who loved flying even more than playing in dirt – without Christopher realizing the favor.

"I suppose you could talk the old dog into it, Harry. Your golden tongue can talk most anyone into most anything."

Harry did laugh at that. Christopher looked up and saw his brother and father were done eating. He ate a few more spoonfuls of soup and pushed the bowl away. "What are we learning today?"

"Today we will work on reading...."

Christopher groaned. "Latin?"

"Yes, Latin," James said. "You will learn the classical languages before I teach you to read English." He kept his smirk to himself. He knew that his boys were already teaching themselves English, based off what they knew of Latin, and he entirely approved. A thing one taught oneself was something one rarely forgot.

The Potter methods of education never seemed to fail, even if the children experiencing them thought they were getting away with something. It was the trickery and deceptions that the Potter method was meant to produce; the teacher gave the student building blocks, the student put everything together to learn what he or she really wanted to learn, like how to read the English language.

James nodded at the sink and both boys went off to wash again. He loved his children, but they were still at a messy stage, Christopher a bit more so than Harry.

James tried to clamp down on the thought. He really didn't like to compare his sons, but sometimes he couldn't stop himself. Unlike Lily or old Albus, James didn't have any grand plans or destinies for either one, save that they remain healthy and happy and that they learn the things they needed to know.

His boys loved the lessons on magical theory, or James demonstrating bits of magic, or in showing both boys basic meditation to control the magic that belonged to them. They adored broom flying, Christopher more than Harry. Christopher also enjoyed plants as an offshoot of his love for digging in the earth. Harry liked their wargames more for the historical aspects, the role playing.

James watched his boys head off for the class room James had set up on the ground floor. His sons were young yet for formal education by muggle and wizarding standards, but James disagreed. Both boys knew elementary mathematics, history, and ancient languages. Christopher was particularly gifted in the basic sciences, like botany and herbology. Harry was the one who understood everything James said about magical theory and meditation.

That last bit was particularly important. Both boys had had bouts of accidental magic since they were young, but Harry...Harry seemed to be able to call for his and control it. If Harry got hungry in the orchard, an apple would usually just fall into his hand – or into Christopher's, if Christopher complained within Harry's hearing.

James hadn't mentioned his observations to anyone, but privately he was glad that the boys seemed to enjoy slightly different things. It would, hopefully, make them less likely to compete for the same things later in life. Harry would be beyond warlock-level with a wand (or possibly even without a wand); Christopher just didn't have the raw power to compete with Harry in the wandless subjects. But, they could be different and equal. James did everything he could to ensure that. That's why he made sure they were exposed to such a wide range of subject areas.

"Alright, my sons, take out your waxboards. Let's start with an easy sentence, shall we? 'The British sailor returned home.' Compose your sentence...in Latin, of course."

Both boys groaned, but began to work. They loved their dad, the taskmaster, and wanted to impress him.

If they did, then Uncle Sirius would reward them later on in the evening...with an hour of flying time.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The Latin lesson ended after two hours with both his boys increasing their vocabularies by a few words...and being able to untangle simple Latin sentences. Now, it was the physical portion of the afternoon.

While James and Lily would have tangled on how to educate their sons had Lily remained in the picture, she likely would have approved of James teaching them muggle football. He loved his boys running around like little madmen. He also liked the skills it would teach them for later, agility, quickness, dodging.

"Christopher, pass to your brother. Harry, no hands, remember?"

James wondered about taking them to see a game. He took them often into the muggle world so they wouldn't grow up ignorant of the greater world around them. A muggle television wouldn't work at Potter Manor, but when James and the boys traveled they stayed in muggle hotels and watched television then.

James blocked the ball that Harry had just kicked in. He threw it back out into the field and watched his twin balls of energy run after it. He treasured days like this. Neither Christopher nor Harry would grow up and remember a perfectly average moment like this...but to James it was priceless.

This is what James had to protect. The Potter Manor's estates had picked up a goblin tunnel not half a kilometer away. The Gringotts goblins were up to something as they rarely created a surface tunnel that didn't open inside a secured location, like a Gringotts branch. They were plotting something against the Potters....

Christopher kicked the ball again and it was coming in at a strange angle. James leapt on the ball to keep it from scoring.

"Excellent, Christopher." James hucked the ball further out this time. Harry ran faster to get it. He didn't mind his boys being competitive with each other in a simple game like this one. A bit of competition was healthy when it was just for fun.

James watched his boys run, kick, stumble, fall, laugh, and get back up.

They were so similar, but so different from each other. It was moments like these that James wondered exactly what prompted Dumbledore to try to call Christopher the Child of Destiny. It made no sense. Harry had been scarred, not Christopher. Harry continued to have more powerful accidental magic...powerful to the point where it was intentional wandless magic at the age of four, five, and six.

That was, perhaps, the only question James still wished he could ask of his old Headmaster.

He saw the ball coming toward him and threw up his hands. He missed the block. Harry's kick sailed through.

"Excellent. You caught me asleep at the net. Go again?"

Both boys began running. James threw the ball as hard as he could. His boys zeroed in on it rapidly. Christopher got it, then Harry stole it away, then back to Christopher.

Equal yet different. James stopped the next kick.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Remus Lupin came by Potter Manor a few days later. He'd begun purchasing some potion that made his transformations easier. James' old friend certainly looked healthier.

"I've just learned something troubling, James."

"Sit down, Moony. Is it about the goblins this time? I know they are up to something."

Lupin sat, shook his head at James' question, and passed a letter to his friend.

James quickly scanned the thing and frowned. "This gypsy is reliable?"

"She's a werewolf I've known for a few years. She and her family travel throughout Europe, but bad things have begun happening to magic users in the forests of Albania."

"So, it could be something, a wraith, possessing people...or animals."

Remus nodded.

"Damn. I had hoped that Albus was wrong. It seems Tom Riddle isn't dead, just weakened. Remus, do you think?" James hated to impose on his friends, but Remus was the only person he could trust with something like this.

"I'm already starting. Sirius opened up his family's home for me so I could use the library. I didn't figure the Potters would have anything that vicious in their collection. No books called How to Become a Wraith or Resurrection in Seven Bloody Steps."

"Dark place that one." James chewed over that information for a moment. "Sirius should do something with that house. Remodel it and move in. He's the Head of the House of Black. He's got a nice apartment, but a house would be better."

"Step one," Remus said, "get rid of that house elf. Walburga poisoned its mind for how many decades? Did she even let another human inside that house after her husband and younger son died?"

James shrugged. "Don't free the thing. Sirius's father and brother were Death Eaters. I wonder if they ever knew what Tom Riddle did to himself, you know, rituals and the like? Perhaps we could figure out a way to question the elf. People like Orion Black wouldn't think twice killing a muggle in front of an elf, knowing it couldn't ever say a thing, let alone discussing plans in front of it."

Remus smiled at that. "I know just the thing. Wizarding truth serums don't work, but there is something perfect for elves, even one that loathes Sirius like that one does."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James had a wide circle of acquaintances and supporters throughout the Ministry. One of those acquaintances tipped him to a series of interesting facts after left a Wizengamot gathering.

A reporter named Carolina Elkins had checked out the official Wizengamot recordings of every one of James' speeches since he'd entered the Wizengamot.

James did a quick bit of research on the witch in question. She didn't use the poisoned pen approach of people like Skeeter and Urvane, but she also never wrote a positive piece on a target, either. She didn't lie often or exaggerate too much...and had a smaller following because of it.

James decided to confront the woman directly. He showed up in her office at the Daily Prophet and sat down before she even had a chance to react. He caught more than a glance of the parchments on her desk. James was definitely her target, as were his friends and his children.

The reporter blinked a few times and then swept the parchments from her desk.

"I came here to see what sort of muckracking you're up to, Elkins. I hope you remember that your colleague Skeeter is still doing community service for the last hatchet job she wrote. Innuendo, a hint of truth, and nothing to back up the boldest of her lies. If she steps over the line again, she faces time in Azkaban...."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"No, ma'am, I don't think you know what you're talking about. However, you bother to at least appear like you're doing research so I will humor you with an interview. You will include my statement in your article, along with proof for any accusations you make, or else I will see you charged." James looked bored as he sat in her chair. "What is your first question?"

The woman took a few moments to collect her breath. It wasn't everyday a target of a secret investigation got wind of what one was planning and presented himself for an interview.

"What do you plan to do with the Wizengamot?" she stuttered out.

"I'm not sure I understand the question."

"You've been stacking the new Wizengamot with families that aren't Noble and Ancient. You've personally nominated the last seven of the eleven new members...and you voted for the others. It occurs to me that you're shaping the Wizengamot for something?"

James nodded. He understood what the woman was asking now.

"Let me explain a bit about the history of that group before I answer your specific question. Ever since wizards showed up in Britain, there have been wars between them. Hogwarts itself was founded during a ninety year war that pitted eight of the most powerful magic users against each other. When apprentices called Slytherin, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw lost their masters to the war, they chose to start a school rather than continue relying exclusively upon the master-apprentice system.

"Then the first unending war started in 1215 or so. Equally matched wizards fought over land and resources. But it was still ongoing at the end of 1385. It had carried over into at least five generations of the same families, always at war, always collateral damage, always attracting muggles into their affairs. It was responsible for inciting no fewer than nine local witch hunts. In 1386, the combatants began negotiations that resulted in these powerful magic users forming a council of equals to settle issues. The Wizengamot was the name we know it by, eventually it added on a bureaucracy that came to be known as the Ministry. In the beginning it was filled with magical giants...each with proven credentials. When someone died or left, the council added an equally strong replacement. Only much later did things settle into decrepitude, with seats being regarded as hereditary assets and up for the highest bid by whoever wanted to influence a vote.

"Today, there are members of the Wizengamot who don't use their wands for anything more strenuous than warming their tea. We have

people who've made their fortunes by selling their votes; without having anything else to recommend them. We have people who haven't passed a single NEWT in the wanded subjects. The group is no longer an equal bunch who arrived on their merit; it is weak and corrupt and ready to be rebuilt from the ground up...."

Here the reporter interrupted James. "What gives you the right?"

"I see the problem and I know how to fix it. I try to get new, powerful blood into the Wizengamot when the old fossils die. Four Ancient families were extinguished during the war with Grindelwald. Did we try to put in any new blood then? No, just minor, undistinguished pureblood families. Offshoots that the true pureblood lines rejected and forced to adopt new names. Umbridge was a bastard line of the Branch family, for instance, and I will ensure that old Excrucius Umbridge never gets seated.

"Now, following the massive deaths in the war with Voldemort, I will not reward the even more minor purebloods who cowered behind their wards. Worthy Ancient families like the Prewitts and McKinnons and even the Fenwicks are mostly extinct now. Soon, those seats will also be vacant when their patricians die. The people I have nominated have short pedigrees in most cases, but they've done things: started new businesses, developed or refined new spells, become exquisite duelists, discovered ancient sites and knowledge previously thought lost, and fought with abandon during the last war for the Ministry and for the Light. These are the types of people we should welcome into the council of equals: it doesn't matter to me if they can trace their magical family back twelve generations or twenty five. Blood matters not at all if the witch or wizard is a weak one or cravenly or corrupt. I will not apologize for stopping the crumbling."

The reporter wasn't writing anything down, just scowling. "Blood matters, Potter. I know what you're doing. Marrying a Muggleborn means we all have to do such a thing, right? I won't let you continue to do whatever you want. I will expose you...."

"Expose whatever great truths you wish, ma'am. Stick to the facts and you'll get away with it. Stray into gross speculation or lies...and we'll tangle."

"You can't touch me, Potter."

"I wonder what your Great Uncle Aurelius will say when he hears how clumsy you've been in getting revenge. So obvious in your attempt to pay me back. A minor, minor pureblood wants a seat on the Wizengamot and expects to get it...except that I put forth the name of someone who created new healing spells and earned an Order of Merlin. I'm sure he was livid."

"You can't prove a thing, Potter," the reporter screeched. "I am a reporter. I have freedom to select whatever topic I wish. I have evidence. I have your own words as part of a plot to throw over the purebloods."

"Cover the ineffective bribes your great uncle paid for a nomination. I did some research: he invested at least seventy-five thousand galleons and got nothing...."

"Get out. Now. Out!"

"Recognize the amount, don't you? Promised you that much in his will, didn't he? Doesn't have it any more, does he? He's squandering what you expected as your inheritance." James stood up and smiled. "Have a nice day."

The woman threw a book as James closed her office door. He then proceeded down the hall and knocked on the editor's door.

"Tintagel, do you have a minute? I'd like to report some possible malfeasance...."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James sat gaping like a fish, while Christopher and Harry were split between gagging and laughing. Sirius Black had just dropped a major bomb.

"Padfoot, you can't be serious...." As the words slipped out of his mouth, James just groaned.

"Of course, I'm serious. My harpy mother named me Sirius."

"Uncle Sirius, why would you want to marry a girl," Christopher asked.

"There are many benefits," Sirius began, leering just a bit, before James cut him off with a glare.

"The Head of the House of Black marrying a muggleborn," James said. "I didn't even know you were dating."

"We kept it quiet. She's a healer at St. Mungo's. Spell Damage."

"Are there any little Blacks on the way?" Both Harry and Christopher were confused at the question, but Sirius just blushed.

"You dog," James said. Harry and Christopher did laugh at that comment, as they were both familiar with Padfoot.

Sirius decided to get over his momentary embarrassment by transforming, leaping on James, and tackling him to the ground. Christopher and Harry piled on and tried to wrestle the eight stone dog to the ground.

Sirius got them all with a substantial licking.

It was only later, after Christopher and Harry went to bed, that James reminded Sirius to be careful. James hadn't dated at all since he'd begun a relationship with Lily. He didn't plan to begin again until Lily had been dead for a decent interval.

Sirius nodded and said he would be careful. But Melinda Cooper had never been a devotee of Dumbledore...and she possessed a fine, sarcastic mind to boot.

"She's not like Lily," Sirius said.

"If she ever is, I'll tell you," James responded, before taking a slug of his whiskey.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The scathing article on James Potter's anti-pureblood philosophy came out on a Wednesday. James smiled as he read it. The story contained at least three big lies and several smaller ones.

James had held back on his response until he saw the work the reporter wanted to publish. Now he was ready to push full steam ahead...save for a complication.

The goblins had apparently given Great Uncle Aurelius some of the 'facts' about James Potter that appeared in the Elkins article (the one the editor had been unwilling to quash).

The Gringotts goblins never gave up their backroom tricks. The blasted creatures never forgot or forgave. They had apparently fabricated some evidence that had been used as part and parcel of this attempt to discredit him in the media.

It was the sixth attempt to attack or otherwise discredit James Potter that he knew of...and he was done with the goblins. They'd stretched and then shattered his patience for them completely.

James had taken two days to rethink his response. It was now late on Friday afternoon. He was ready to respond.

James Potter walked into the DMLE and asked to speak with Director Fisher. As a respected member of the Wizengamot, Fisher would make time for James.

"I have come to file a couple of complaints."

The Director, a rather grizzled old Auror, looked up from his mounds of paperwork. "Why did you ask for me?"

"I thought you'd like to know I was accusing the Goblin Nation of treaty breaking."

The director's face blanched. That was a surefire way to start a goblin rebellion.

"They have broken the treaty in regards to client information. They pretended to give my information to an old wizard who wanted a seat on the Wizengamot...but in truth they handed over fabricated documents certified as genuine. That's what that witch used to write part of her story about me, lies from the goblins. I would also like to swear out complaints against Aurelius and Carolina Elkins. I intend to ask for them to be sentenced to a month of community service and for Aurelius to be labeled a corruptor of the public for his

unsuccessful attempts to bribe his way to a seat on the Wizengamot." That last bit would forever disqualify Aurelius from holding public office.

The conversation devolved from there. The goblins would riot; wizards would withdraw their wealth as soon as they could once they learned of goblin duplicity in framing a former customer. The economy would collapse. No one cared about the two members of the Elkins family; it was the rest of the world that mattered.

It would set the wizarding world afire.

Director Fisher quickly agreed to have the Elkins both picked up. Hell, to avert a goblin rebellion, he would have ordered them immediately into Azkaban, but he didn't even dare joke about such a thing with someone like James Potter.

"What do I have to do to get you to call this off?" the Director asked.

James thought over the question before smiling. He'd been waiting for this moment through the entire negotiation.

He pulled a narrow sheet of paper from his pocket. "Arrange for me to speak with these goblins and we might, perhaps, be able to avert this disaster, Director."

The director looked at the list and got even paler. He knew the names; they were the chief remaining opposition to the current Director, Ragnok. Old Fisher had a bit of an idea as to what James Potter was planning. He wasn't sure which was worse: a full-scale goblin rebellion or this...this plot.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James woke up on a Tuesday, got dressed, sat down at the desk in his study, and almost immediately became annoyed.

Severus Snape – a convict at Azkaban, even with his weak story of spying for the insane Albus Dumbledore, a story no one else could or would bother to prove – had written to Lily Potter, asking for her forgiveness. He came clean about telling Voldemort of a prophecy...one that led to the attack on the Potters.

James wondered if Severus had suddenly grown a soul...but he doubted it was possible.

It was possible Albus Dumbledore had spun Snape into a web of his own, one to rival Lily's. But James felt no compassion for anyone who remained blind to Dumbledore. The man was a criminal and deserved worse than what he got.

Snape...deserved his life sentence in Azkaban.

James Potter burned the letter from Severus Snape. Lily wouldn't miss it; she never got any mail at all. People tended to forget about a squib.

But James began to turn over what he remembered about Snape in his mind. He and Sirius had been particularly vicious toward the young man...and James did feel a touch of remorse at that. The boy couldn't help his disaffected status in Slytherin; nor his unappealing physical features.

Snape had been vicious from the first moment James had met the man, but James didn't need to respond to viciousness with more of the same. He had grown a lot, hadn't he? His need to protect his sons had forced him to mature, scary as that idea was. Now even Sirius was marrying.

The world was changing.

It had no room for people like Snape, people who chose to commit evil, foul deeds for a monster. James might have helped turn Snape to the road he'd walked with his schoolyard torments, but James had not forced Severus to walk it. Snape made that choice on his own; let him serve out his prison sentence.

James' bullying days for the mostly innocent were over. He reserved his cruelty for enemies who deserved it now.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James walked into the Ministry and headed to a secure meeting room on the fifth floor. If all went to plan, James would have a chance to outline his 'offer' to a number of goblins from Gringotts. If it went badly...well, James had a contingency in place.

No one would ever again endanger the Potter Family. Not even filthy, lying goblins. He was tired of their plots; of that ominous tunnel they had created near the Potter Manor; of their perpetual scheming directed at him and his children.

James walked into the conference and saw the five snarling goblins seated at the table. They all seemed to know who James Potter was.

"Wizard, why have you requested us?"

"I am giving you one chance to avoid extinction," James said.

One of the surly beasts pulled out a dagger and looked like he was ready to leap across the table. The beast jumped and thudded into an invisible shield that divided the room in half.

"Sit down and listen. Your leader has some sort of vendetta against me and has now attacked me through proxies six times I am aware of. There will be no seventh attempt. Every bit of information I have on Gringotts will be published tomorrow...unless Ragnok and all those who support him are dead by eight o'clock tonight."

"No one will believe you, wizard."

"They don't have to believe my information. They just have to doubt yours. You'll have a run on the bank that will stretch for kilometers. I win. Then, I'll present evidence that Gringotts has been breaking treaties for at least ten years. Once the last wizard has cleared out his belongings, we'll declare open season on you all. No more goblins at the bank...."

James sat back in his chair and watched the goblins struggle with the new reality. The wizard that had bested Ragnok all those years ago had finally gotten annoyed enough with them to destroy them all.

The goblins had always realized the weakness of their position. They could don armor and use their best weapons, but it wouldn't amount to anything. It never did. The wizards, like in their past wars, had wands and spells. Goblins had tunnels in which to hide and conduct raids. But this wizard, and presumably others, had new weapons, weapons that harmed only goblins.

"What would we receive for this action," the seeming leader asked.

"Life," James said. "I am done negotiating with you. If you do not agree to my demands – and swear them on a blood oath – I will see every goblin in Britain killed. I do not do this lightly, but you have attacked me with lies and slander. Your leader forged documents and swore them to be genuine. There is no honor left among your people. I found out that you plan to attack my Family Seat through a tunnel you've created. You are out of control. Fix the problem or die."

The goblins began speaking to each other in their harsh language. After a few minutes, the lead goblin reverted to English. "What oath would we have to swear?"

"To abide by all treaties made with wizards and to forever leave the Potter Family and its allies unmolested in every way."

"What penalty?"

"The death of every oathbreaker." The truth of the oath was a touch more severe, but it did include the death of every oathbreaker.

"It seems so little you ask for but it does risk all our lives...."

"Your leader has been escalating his attacks. I don't think it's long before he tries assassination or an assault on me and mine. I have left him to his petty revenges for too long. I leave this room in four minutes with or without your answer."

The goblins took two minutes to decide. They would mutiny against those goblins they hated; they would aid the wizard they hated; they would swear the oath.

James pulled two items from his cloak, a goblin bloodstone that Artemis Potter had won during a goblin rebellion and a sheet of parchment containing the exact wording of the oath. It had all the loopholes closed.

The goblins grumbled and tried to negotiate when they saw the exact wording. "You cannot expect us to swear to this. It says that the stones of Gringotts will fall down upon the first treachery. It would kill us all."

James nodded. "It would also kill the oathbreaker, as I stated."

"May we perform the oath in...."

"No," James said. "You will do the oath in English on the bloodstone I have provided. I don't care to know what sort of doublecrossing you planned, but I won't change a single word. If you 'inadvertently' change a word, I will consider our deal off. Do you understand?"

Ten minutes later, after much gnashing of teeth, the goblins performed their oaths. They had committed their entire race to follow the wizard-goblin treaties upon pain of extinction.

James stood to leave first. "I will look for the signal at eight o'clock tonight. If it is not there, then I will take my countermeasures."

In fact, James had been prepared to attack the goblins for years...they had just not pushed him hard enough until this point. James' weapons were already in place inside Gringotts and inside the deeper mine shafts where the goblins built their homes. James had become a ruthless pragmatist since the attack from Voldemort. He would attack before he was attacked. He would try to solve problems before they became insoluble.

James left the Ministry and apparated back to the Manor. He had twenty minutes before Christopher and Harry's next lesson on magical theory. Today, they were covering wands and why wizards used them.

Although, because of Harry's likely raw strength, James wouldn't couch the lesson in absolutes. Instead of 'all wizards use wands to cast their spells,' perhaps he would say, 'most wizards use wands to help intensify their natural magic to make spells work.' It was a small edit, but important for Harry.

He did not want to place any mental limits on his sons.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The next morning James looked at the Daily Prophet. "Gringotts Stages Coup; New Director Installed; Bank Reopens Tomorrow."

It was a start. Bad enough they fabricated evidence. Bad enough the tunnel they'd hollowed out to permit an invasion of the Potter Manor. Next time, their duplicity would wipe them all out. In all honesty, James expected Gringotts to implode within a year. Goblins were far too warlike to survive under their new limitations.

Christopher and Harry arrived at the table and saw the Prophet. "Bloody goblins and their wars," Harry said. "Is that the reason we don't bank with goblins?"

James nodded his head and slathered some jam on his toast.

"Eat up, my boys, we have a full morning because the Wizengamot is in session this afternoon. Remus will come for lunch and stay until I get back."

Both boys looked happy. They didn't see Remus all that often, but he was a lot of fun, different from Uncle Sirius, but still fun.

Harry liked eggs. Christopher had to be discouraged from eating as many sausages as he'd like. James pointed at his boys and reminded them to have some oatmeal. Both his sons groaned.

"You'll never be strong enough to best me in a wizard's duel, then, will you?"

Harry grumped and pulled a bowl of oatmeal toward him. Christopher held out a bit longer before he realized James wasn't going to crumble.

James did smile at this. His boys' failed rebellions. They would get stronger as they aged, but he hoped they would always, in the end, listen to sound advice. For now, it was but a game; later it would be more critical.

James stood up to leave when a distraught Cilly popped into the room. James took the elf by the hand and led her from the kitchen. He had half an idea what had Cilly so upset.

"Has something happened?" James asked.

Cilly bobbed her head up and down, but the words failed her.

"Has she passed on?"

The elf's head continued to bob. Lily was dead.

"I'm sorry you had to discover that, Cilly. Please rest in your room for the next day or two."

The elf looked grateful and disappeared.

James slumped back against the wall and began to think. Part of him was relieved. Part was even happy for the death of a betrayer. But, there was a small piece, the normally silent piece, that was sad for the death of the woman he'd once loved, the woman who had given him the boys he loved beyond all measure.

Time seemed to stop until Harry strolled out of the kitchen.

"Is it time for lessons?" Harry asked. James hugged his son and called for Christopher.

"Perhaps we'll take off lessons this morning, my boys. Something sad has happened. You know how your mother was sick since that bad wizard tried to attack us all?"

Both his sons nodded.

"Well, she went to live in Avalon with Merlin today. Her body wasn't strong enough."

Both boys began to cry, more out of confusion than anything else. Neither one remembered knowing or seeing Lily. There were a few pictures of her throughout the Manor...but that wasn't the same.

The planned lesson became a time to tell some of the more pleasant stories he had about Lily. How smart she was; how funny when scowling at a Marauder prank. He would have to tell them the truth about her betrayal later on...as it was now an official part of the Family history. But that could wait a few years. Lily was no longer around to do any damage to Christopher or Harry.

James settled his boys in for an early nap and then filled in Remus when he showed up for lunch. Remus wasn't surprised and didn't tear up. The old wolf had hated Lily from the second he'd listened to

her veritaserum confession. Wolves like him couldn't brook betrayal in any form.

James went off to the trials of the Elkins family with a heavy heart. He wouldn't be a judge because of his relationship to the case. He'd be a mere spectator this time around. But he was sure justice would be done.

It was a good thing he wouldn't be asked to speak. He wasn't sure he could draw on his calm, dispassionate mind to make any sort of complex argument.

But the goal was worthy. James had to be there to see this little battle waged. Purebloods no longer had a lock on the government just because of their ancestry. Purebloods who did something could get a seat, as could halfbloods and the muggleborn. Talent was what mattered in government.

Family was what mattered in everything else.

James kept the tears walled up until the Elkins were sentenced for their crimes. A few little droplets escaped. The Daily Prophet photographer captured a stunning picture of James Potter crying...but not for the reason the entire wizarding world thought.

That image of unhinged emotion did more to sway people to James' cause than any argument he could have made. Things began to change faster, not all of them good.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It was a week after Lily's public funeral service when James, Remus, and Sirius managed to have coinciding schedules that would permit them to see what the Black Family elf knew. Kreacher was a disgusting mess since the death of Walburga, but within his muttering there was a hint of truth.

Sirius walked inside 12 Grimmauld Place and cringed. It was filthy, utterly disgusting. He led James and Remus to the largest room on the main floor.

"Kreacher," Sirius said.

Moments later the elf shambled into the room. He was either too old or too curmudgeonly to use elf magic any longer. "Filthy master has returned, a disgrace to wizard-kind."

"Drink this, Kreacher. Be quick about it."

The elf wanted to disagree or walk away or spit at its master, but the bond forbade any of those actions. Kreacher accepted the concoction Remus had brewed.

Moments later, the elf began answering questions without hesitation concerning what its Masters had done. The cruelties of Orion Black; Regulus' strange order for the elf to help Voldemort and then return; the story of a lake of inferi and a locket, a locket hidden in this house.

All three of the interrogators were sickened by what they heard, Sirius most of all. His brother had finally woken and turned away from the Death Eaters. Sirius was so glad...and unable to express it to the brother he'd once loved.

James and Remus were more disturbed by the fact that Voldemort had created horcruxes...and had hidden them behind traps. Once Remus saw the locket he began testing it with spells he had researched from the Black Library...and he told James what the results meant. It was a tiny fraction of a soul contained within; not the half soul of a first horcrux, or even a quarter or eighth soul. Tom Riddle had made several before this locket.

"How are we going to find the other ones?" James asked.

Remus shook his head. "This one was complete luck. I doubt it'll be a simple thing to find the others."

James sighed. It had just become monumentally harder to protect his family. Lily was dead; Gringotts was neutralized under the everlong threat of destruction. But, this was proof.

Voldemort was still out there...and he wasn't likely to be knitting in his spare time. The evil wizard was plotting and preparing.

James had to do the same, but he knew nothing about this magic. He did not want to know anything about this form of magic. He

needed something to combat it, something as pure as the horcrux itself was evil.

That was his next step. This time the stakes were unbelievable. James could not fail.

The Potters had to prevail.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A Father's Love, Part 3

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James Potter continually doubted his decision to accept a place on the Hogwarts Board of Governors. He had joined three years before his sons were ready to attend, as was the tradition for those wealthy families invited to join the board...and listened to every sort of bellyaching and minutiae imaginable. Who knew that the Governors griped about the school menu or about the state of the Quidditch pitch or when it was time to replace the bed curtains in the Ravenclaw dormitories.

Why did they never have a substantive discussion on the curriculum? He knew Amelia Bones had comments to make. James certainly did. But the meetings were always thirty minutes shorter than necessary to have a real discussion. Real discussions didn't exist, after all.

James knew it was all for show. The Headmistress and her staff did whatever the hell they wanted...and then had the Board rubber stamp it.

Just walking through the place was a punch in the face. The facilities were old, of course, as it was a millennia old castle, but it had never looked this dank or unwelcoming before. He had met with all the faculty and wasn't terribly impressed.

James remembered his time at school vividly – mostly the pranks he, Sirius, Remus, and that other person pulled – but he didn't remember the standards being so low then. James tried to bring up these issues at every meeting, only to be told no one else was interested or that the meeting was over schedule.

Over schedule? A worthless bureaucratic reason to avoid doing hard but necessary things.

In James' time at Hogwarts, the school used former Aurors for DADA instructors and a competent, albeit rather slick and slimy, instructor for Potions. What Minerva was talking about was hiring someone like this...this former undistinguished Muggle Studies Professor to teach DADA for the next term. Ridiculous. Quirrel or something like that.

James bit his tongue as they moved through the agenda. Books were authorized for the coming term, although James voted against the list. Most of the ones James knew from experience were quite bad. New teachers were hired in three positions, although James voted against two of them.

He hadn't been raised to be a rubber stamp, although it seemed to be expected. Approve the Headmistress' requests and contribute lavishly. Complain about the little things, if you liked, but don't dare mention anything important. If today went as James expected, he would never attend one of these pointless meetings again.

The open portion of the meeting began about three hours after they'd all sat down. James raised his hand to signal he had an issue to deal with. As he was a fairly new addition to the board (some were now into their fifteenth year), he was the fourth one to introduce a concern.

Many of the board members groaned. Many people who served on the Governors had pet projects or pet peeves. Reginald Bucket insisted on buying better school brooms, but the other Governors never agreed to fund them (and Bucket never just bought some and donated them to the school). Amelia Bones, the current Head Auror, ranted about the quality of Auror and Hit Wizard applicants. Alessandria Zweibel insisted that the classical arts be returned to the curriculum as electives: painting, music, wizarding literature, and the like.

As James Potter began to speak, everyone knew what his issue was: the Defense program. What he said this time was quite a bit more strident than anything he'd said before.

"My twin sons turn eleven later this summer. However, I will not enroll them in Hogwarts unless there are some changes made during this meeting. I will also resign my seat unless I feel comfortable allowing my boys to attend...."

Here, non-Governor Minerva McGonagall, the Headmistress, stood up and asked James what he meant.

"I have asked at each of the twelve meetings I've been on the Board to look into and change the Defense program, plus other woefully

inadequate elements of the school. There hasn't been any true continuity in DADA instructors since old Professor Merrythought resigned long before my time. No one has listened to me during all my attempts at reform. This is the final chance I will give this school to reform itself before I wash my hands of my alma mater...."

"But Hogwarts is the greatest school of magic in Europe," Board Chairman Kendall Mackey said.

James shrugged. "It once was, perhaps. Minerva is an outstanding transfiguration instructor and her replacement is certainly good enough. Charms was well taught when Flitwick was here, but they've gone through four teachers in the last five years. Potions is no longer taught by a certified master. Defense, as you know, was last taught by a certified master in 1984. Amelia here has been squawking almost as long as I have about the poor quality of those applying for certain Ministry jobs...."

Headmistress McGonagall silenced the Governors with a rather stern look.

"Mr. Potter, what do you suggest?"

"I have been giving fifty thousand galleons per year as a donation to the school since I took my seat on the Governors. That's one hundred fifty thousand galleons total so far. I imagine that the others in this room donate generously as well. With this level of support, are you telling me we can't afford better curricula and instructors than we currently have?"

By the shocked gasps from the others in the room, no one else was donating as generously as James. But he did love his school and he did want it to be a place fit for his sons. So far, he hadn't seen any major overhauls.

"An old castle is expensive to maintain, but that's neither here nor there, James," Minerva said with a cross glare. "What do you specifically propose?"

"End the Defense program. People claim it's cursed...I don't care, I just know it doesn't work. Start up a dueling program and hire a retired dueling champion to teach it. Give the historical component of Defense (explanations of dark rituals, history related to the dark

arts, and such) to a qualified history instructor. No more ghosts. Change Care of Magical Creatures to just Magical Creatures, make it mandatory and teach about vampires and werewolves alongside with unicorns and dragons. Conduct an international search for the best qualified teachers, no more regard for a Hogwarts pedigree. I don't care if the Head of Slytherin went to Beauxbatons, it doesn't matter to me. The school has the money, spend it. Hogwarts can be the best...if we want it to be and if we make it happen."

James finished his impassioned speech and looked at Minerva McGonagall. She had heard much of his line of reasoning before...but he'd never said he would withdraw his children unless the school changed...or that he'd leave the board and stop donating.

The rest of the Governors had heard it all, too, but none of them liked the threat that James had leveled. Of course his children would go to Hogwarts. Would he deny his children a quality education?

"What would you do instead?" Amelia Bones asked.

"I will continue to tutor them myself and hire tutors for the more specialized areas." He sounded entirely convinced of his strategy. The Governors would capitulate or James would take his chips and leave the game.

The Board Chairman looked around the table and asked, "Does anyone wish to second Mr. Potter's suggested curricula and staffing changes?"

James didn't look desperate. He seemed resigned to his children not attending Hogwarts. He had, after all, spent years lobbying for this reform already.

No one raised his hand.

The chairman said, "The motion fails." Left unsaid was the word, 'again.'

"Fine," James said, pulling an envelope from his cloak. "Here is my letter of resignation from the Board of Governors."

James got up and pushed past Minerva who wanted to speak with one of her favorite students from the past. She even followed him outside the doors of the meeting room.

"James, wait a moment."

"Yes, Minerva?"

"You can't be serious."

"No, I'm James Potter. Sirius Black would never take a seat on the Board...." James stopped when Minerva rolled her eyes. "As to what I just said, tell Pomona Sprout not to bother sending letters to Christopher and Harry. We've been discussing the situation here for a year. They're excited to have lessons at home, if you really want to know."

"But...."

"It was fine for me, Minerva, because I taught myself and Remus taught me and Sirius taught me. I've got together a couple of kids who'll be learning with Christopher and Harry, like a miniature Gryffindor House. I want them to know history well...and to master runes and learn warding...and to be expert duelists. I want them to be able write well...and understand politics and finance, things I didn't even dare bring up in front of the Board. These are all things they've told me they wanted. I'm just making it happen. Hogwarts wasn't willing to end unproductive traditions. I won't subject my boys to something worthless...."

Minerva bristled at the implications. "I know you've been proposing things like this for a while now...since taking your seat, actually, but can't you see the bigger picture?"

"Stop there. The only reason I took the seat and made the donations was to remake my alma mater. It isn't adequate the way it is now. I only came out of school as good in runes and transfiguration as I did because of some...err, extracurricular activities me and my friends got up to. Ten percent of what I learned came from the approved curriculum; the rest was stuff we discovered on our own or made up. That's a huge risk and a waste of time. I want my boys – and later, my girls and Sirius' children and Remus', too, if he ever gets started – to have the best possible education. Can you say that Binns is as

good as you can do for inspiring students to learn our history? Or that Dolores Umbridge is even merely adequate at teaching Charms after she got sacked from the Ministry?"

Minerva started to interject.

"Don't. I've seen the figures and the names. The best potential recruits among the purebloods and halfbloods go to America nowadays – or a few to Beauxbatons or even Durmstrang. The top performers in every year at Hogwarts are the muggleborn who don't have easy access to magical places outside Britain. Albus and then you allowed the school to fall to this. Don't think I haven't realized my donations went to prop up the budget – rather than for new programs as those galleons were intended – because of sagging enrollment."

Minerva frowned but didn't argue.

"You're at the beginning of a vicious cycle. The best flee Britain for their education now. Soon it will be the next tier or two down. Then it will be just the muggleborn who don't know any better plus those who attend Hogwarts merely out of tradition. If you don't give the best students a reason to come, Hogwarts will essentially close its door in fifty years. I'd hoped to change that, but I wasted my time and galleons on rubber stampers who didn't care to listen. Be happy. You can preside over the end of a once-great institution, Minerva."

James walked calmly away not even giving his former teacher a second glance. He wasn't angry...more disappointed.

Hogwarts' grand traditions were about to strangle it to death.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James gave the news to his sons and they smiled. They had actually accompanied their dad a few times to Hogwarts and didn't like what they'd seen.

None of the students smiled very much in the hallways.

A few Gryffindors and Slytherins traded hexes and hit another student from Hufflepuff. No one helped the bystander or even apologized. The school looked like it was filled with jerks.

And the few classes the boys had poked their heads into were dead boring. History was probably Harry's favorite subject and he'd heard Binns explain at least four things that were lies about one of the goblin rebellion. The ghost probably hadn't heard the latest hypotheses on what had happened, but wizards caused one of the wars Binns blamed on goblins.

Harry wanted to be the best duelist around. He knew he could do it, too. Or maybe a warder – or a spell crafter. There were so many things to do with magic, so many things that had never been done before.

Christopher loved his potions and his plants. He wondered if he might like to work as a Healer...or as a researcher. Someone who made up new potions could have a lot of fun, too.

Neither Harry nor Christopher imagined being a politician like their father was. What he did didn't make any sense to them at all.

James ushered them into their classroom. "This is your last chance. I could still arrange you places at Salem or Beauxbatons...."

Harry shook his head. "No, no backing out, old man. You promised us lessons and field trips. So you have to deliver."

James barked out a laugh. "We'll just see if you can stand up to the curriculum. You're both past what a second year at Hogwarts would have learned by now...but we'll be covering more fields than the typical Hogwarts students learns. Mr. and Mrs. Flamel will be by next week to see if either of you have an aptitude for alchemy. I also have my semi-retired former Charms teacher to work with you on spells and dueling once a week. It'll be good to have more than just me, Sirius, and Remus, huh? A new style to learn from...."

"Do you think Mr. Flamel would really teach me?" Christopher asked. He had a complete collection of the books Flamel had published concerning his endeavors in magic. Christopher couldn't understand everything in them yet, but he definitely wanted to.

"He wouldn't be coming at all unless he was interested in trying."

Nicholas was definitely interested in doing some tutoring on potions and alchemy, but James left out the other reason for the visit. Nicholas was searching for a better place to hide some of his most valuable possessions. Given the continuing problems with the goblins, no one left truly priceless things there any more.

James had let a few select people know about the vaults he'd carved out under the Potter Manor following his own break with Gringotts. Remus used one while Sirius had his own set under the Black Manor in London.

James had modestly claimed at the Governors' meeting to plan to arrange for 'some tutors' when in fact he'd arranged for some of the best magical theorists, historians, spell crafters, and others to help instruct his children. He planned to learn from the experience with Christopher and Harry so he could better instruct his two daughters, Melisse and Athena. Sirius now had six sprogs and didn't seem to understand the concept of moderation – or birth control. Perhaps even Remus would contribute some kids to the school population one day.

In addition, a few families had decided to club in with what they all called the Potter Experiment. The Boots were going to send Terry to the Potter Manor daily as were the Patils. Blaise Zabini had also received an invitation, but it wasn't clear if he was coming yet. His mother was pushing for him to go to Durmstrang. James had invited Frank Longbottom's son, Neville, but Frank assured James that Neville would do at least his first year at Hogwarts. It was family tradition, after all.

Christopher and Harry had a small, but close circle of friends and most of them would be coming to the Manor for their schooling.

All of the children had been educated more or less in the old ways: classical languages, heavy magical theory, some wand work starting at around age nine, literature, history and legends, mathematics, sciences, and such. They would be prepared to advance rapidly. James thought they would all take seven years to complete their schooling, but hoped they would all be through at least the first stage of their Masteries by the time they were seventeen or eighteen.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The Daily Prophet arrived the next morning just as James sat down to breakfast. He took a sip of his coffee and opened the paper. He dropped the cup and spat out the hot liquid.

Severus Snape Escapes from Azkaban

The article said little more than that although it stretched on and on through useless comments from Ministry officials blaming anyone but themselves for this screw up. James snarled and stalked over to the fireplace.

"Sirius Black." Sirius still worked for the Ministry, even though he had more than enough money to paint seascapes and burn the canvases.

"Prongs?" A tired Sirius stared back.

"Snape escaped?"

"I'm not on the team, but he's been out for a day or so."

"How does one escape...."

Sirius seemed to shrug. "No one knows. He hasn't had any visitors in months."

"He wasn't the most vicious of the Death Eaters or the most skilled with a wand...but he was the one I feared the most."

"Why?"

"Because he hated me and Lily personally. He went out of his way at the battle of Cresswell Lake to target me."

"I remember."

"I'll have to tell everyone. Evangeline won't be happy that her family is in danger."

"You tell your wife that no oily Snivellus will get through the wards on Potter Manor."

"I hope it's true."

Whenever something went right, another two things seemed to fall apart. It was the life of a Potter. James had his sons' education arranged and now this...Snape was free. What else could go wrong?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James kept his sons close to him that afternoon. Instead of flying – at least until James had a chance to add a few new layers of detection wards – the boys were beginning their lessons in finance. Both Christopher and Harry understood mathematics well enough, but finance was a bit more art than science.

"Sit. I promise you'll like at least part of the lesson. No, really." James was trying to win over a fairly skeptical audience.

James snagged two leather bound volumes from a table and then sat down at the table with his sons. "Here are the ledgers for the trust vaults you have downstairs. After a few lessons, we'll get into the accounts you both have at muggle banks. You're going to learn finance by using real galleons, real British pounds. You'll definitely pay attention that way."

"What?" Christopher asked, snatching the ledger from his father. "This is ours for a class on money?"

James nodded. It wasn't a lot of galleons, five thousand each, but it was enough to keep them focused.

He handed Harry his ledger.

"We have a lot to cover."

Both his sons groaned. They knew what James meant. The first five lessons would be incomprehensible until they taught themselves what it all meant. Then the next five would be even harder.

James opened a sample ledger and began explaining how it was laid out and what all the different information meant.

"The key thing is that you don't want most of your galleons sitting in this ledger. You want to move them from the bullion page to the

investments page, right? You want periodic payments coming in from reasonably safe investments – for the time being. Eventually we will cover things like speculation and high risk lending. For now, I want you to cover basic lending and investing."

Christopher asked, "What's the difference between lending and investing, then?"

James smiled. "An excellent question. One I expect the answer to at our next lesson on finance."

Harry scratched away some notes while Christopher sat with a scrunched face. They both suppressed their groans at having homework.

"Also," James said, "I want you to present one idea of how you would like to lend or invest a portion of the galleons in your account. Explain the idea thoroughly and be ready to defend it in class."

That had both boys a bit more interested. Thinking about 'spending' money was more interesting than just writing essays.

James was glad to see he'd sparked their interest. He still had to tell them about Snape and his escape from Azkaban...and the danger they were temporarily in.

He'd explain the news about Snape and then let them head off to fencing practice. Christopher had been especially interested in that old form of self-defense after slowly realizing he'd never best his brother with a wand. James was happy to oblige, even if he was a rank amateur with a sword.

Fencing was extraordinary exercise and quite good for agility. He wanted to be sure his children would always be able to defend themselves. Christopher was already taking about making a mild poison to coat his blades with. James shook his head, but knew not to get in a fight with either son unless they were using randomly selected training blades.

He didn't relish the idea of being knocked unconscious because of a stray cut. His sons were vicious and efficient in a battle, whether physical or magical. It was exactly what James had trained them to be.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James Potter was right to be wary. Severus Snape was resting within two kilometers of the Potter Manor as James discussed the situation with his oldest children.

Severus needed to rest up and heal from Dementor exposure before beginning the next phase of his plan. Ever since that guard showed him a magazine article on the fourth anniversary of Lily Potter's death – Voldemort's Last Victim – Severus had thought of nothing except for revenge.

He had loved Lily with all his heart. He had gotten both Voldemort and Dumbledore – whichever wizard was the victor – to promise Severus the death of James Potter and Lily's hand in marriage. Instead, Severus had lost both masters, both potential saviors, and spent ten years in Azkaban.

He smiled an insane grin as he contemplated what he was about to do.

He would hit the wizarding world in a place where they didn't know it would hurt. He would kill the Child of Prophecy – whichever brat it was – before bringing down the glorious house of Potter. His enemies would be ash.

The best part was the world at large didn't know about the prophecy or that it meant that Voldemort was likely still around in some form or other. Wouldn't this be a fitting type of wide spread vengeance? Kill off the savior before anyone even knew he'd be needed....

Just a few days to prepare, to heal, to mend. Then revenge. No one could stop Severus. He had nothing else to live for, just this single, last act.

A man with nothing to live for was pathetic. A man with plenty to live for was productive. A man with only one thing to live for was the most dangerous being in the world.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Remus and Sirius were taking turns dueling with the Potter boys while James was holding a class for Melisse, Athena, and three of Sirius' similarly aged children.

Remus sweated as he batted away a stunner that little Harry shot his way. The boy had to be gifted with some sort of short-range foresight. Remus was dodging as well as any werewolf could (which was a few times better than even the best human) and still Harry sent his spells to where Remus would be, not to where he had been.

It looked like Harry misaimed all his spells, but it turned out he was deadly accurate. How? How did he do it?

Likewise, how did a pre-first year have a stunner powerful enough to crack an adult wizard's shield after only one spell. Remus hadn't been on the defensive like this since he'd sprinkled fleas in Sirius Black's bed back in their seventh year at Hogwarts.

Harry sent three spells – Remus hadn't heard the incantations although he'd seen Harry's lips move – that Remus couldn't completely dodge. He let the yellow one hit him and then he began singing a song he'd never heard before. Thankfully, he only got through a few lines before Harry stunned Remus.

Remus mentally cursed James Potter before he lost consciousness; the man wanted to spend a few hours with his nieces and nephews (Sirius' kids), so Sirius and Remus had been sent to Potter Mansion.

On the other side of the room, Sirius was dueling with swords with Christopher. Sirius had done three quick rounds with spells and beaten Christopher each time. Now it was a bit more fair with swords as Sirius was terrible and Christopher was quite gifted for his age group.

Sirius didn't notice the spell from the other side of the room that washed over him. It took him a few moments to notice what had happened. Apparently Harry had decided to spice up their duel.

Sirius now had a peg leg – or at least the illusion of one – and Christopher had an eye patch and an animated parrot on one shoulder.

"Yarr!" Sirius shouted before charging the wayward young prankster. Remus just stood back and let Sirius attempt to attack Harry with his safety sword. Harry flicked his wand and the sword was transfigured into a length of neon green foam rubber.

"Yarr!" Harry shouted back.

Then Christopher joined in as Harry fled, laughing, from the room. Harry ran out a side door and bent down to pick up a stick which he transfigured into another length of foam rubber. Christopher's sword soon joined in; the three of them fought each other for quite some time before Remus wandered out and pulled Sirius away for a few minutes.

Christopher and Harry continued their mock battle for another half hour, shouting out random pirate-like slogans from time to time. When they finished, they both flopped to the ground, positively exhausted but still chuckling at the silliness.

Harry was the first to get up and begin to head back...but Christopher snagged his wrist.

"Do you hear that, Harry?"

Harry stopped moving and listened.

"It sounds like a wounded animal, Chris. I'll tell the lead grounds elf."

"No, it's hurt badly. I want to go help it."

"We can't leave the wards right now, remember?"

Christopher let his concern override what he knew to be his father's instructions. Harry leveled his wand and thought of stunning his brother, but the boy crossed the ward line while Harry dithered.

"Merlin," Harry muttered before running after his brother. He whipped off a messaging spell for Sirius to let him know a bit about this insane stunt. When Harry crossed the ward line, he couldn't hear where his brother had gotten off to.

"Christopher?"

The only thing Harry heard was more of the pained keening of some wounded animal. Harry ran toward it after assuming that was where his brother was heading.

Rash Gryffindors, Harry decided. Harry had tamed down more of his impulsive tendencies than Christopher had...so this was a painful exercise to locate and retrieve his brother.

He entered the forest proper that surrounded the Manor and followed the whimpering. He entered a small clearing and saw a wounded doe, bleeding like someone had tortured it.

A second later a spell crashed into his back and Harry fell, insensate, to the grass.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius was sitting in the lounge with Remus when he received the message from Harry. "Reckless...." He began grumbling.

"Come on, Moony. We have two little young men to beat soundly around their brains."

The pair ran to the side door and then out past the wards. Remus heard a few whimpers of a wounded animal before all sound stopped...and then he heard the crack of a multi-apparition.

"Oh, no, Sirius. A wizard out there...."

Sirius closed his eyes and calmed himself. He rested his wand on his hand and said, "Point me Christopher Potter."

The wand swiveled toward the right.

"Point me Harry Potter."

The wand didn't move. Both boys were in the same place.

Sirius whipped off a messaging spell to James. This could be very bad. Sirius had no doubt that Snape had somehow lured the boys out. Harry had gone only after Christopher left the wards, if the messaging spell were true.

This was very bad.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Severus Snape pushed the twins deeper into the tunnel that had become his home in the last few days. He took both their wands and snapped them. One had carried a piece of colored muggle filth and it was thrown to the floor.

Snape wanted to taste their fear before he killed them both. He wanted their screams...and he wanted it drawn out. Still, he wasn't a dumb man. He suspected that he would have company in a very short period of time.

He pointed his wand at both the little Potter bastards and woke them with brief blasts from the Cruciatus. Sad to say, Snape would have liked to have held the spells longer, but he was still weak.

The one with the messier hair and eyes like Lily's looked around first. His arms and face muscles twitched a bit from his brief introduction to the pain curse. The Potter twin despaired when he realized they weren't in a forest any longer.

"Snape, is it?" the boy asked with a shaky voice.

"Half a brain isn't any use to a dead lump, is it?"

Snape kicked at the other Potter twin, the one who was still twitching on the tunnel floor. "Wake up. You need to see it all."

The other twin slowly, painfully, pushed himself upright.

The mouthy one began to say something so Severus leveled his wand at him. He barely noticed that the mouthy twin stared at his brother and then at a place behind Snape. Snape turned his head just a bit, just in time to feel a steel blade pierce through his wand shoulder.

Where had the other Potter gotten a sword? Snape had destroyed everything but that muggle item...it must have been a transfigured sword. Damn! Foolish, very foolish.

The pain hit him and Snape flopped to the ground. The mouthy twin snatched the wand from Snape's hand. He snapped Snape's wand without hesitation.

"No," Snape called out.

The mouthy twin looked furious. Snape felt the smallest twinge of fear. "I should ask how an escaped prisoner got one at all."

"I found it, you little bastard."

"So you have an accomplice of some sort. Someone who aided you in your escape. That's where I'd put my bet, you know. It is theoretically possible escape from Azkaban under one's own steam, but I had you pegged for inadvertent assistance. Seems you really had overt help, eh?"

"I got out myself," Snape said. The mouthy twin weighed the statement for a few minutes before nodding.

"Fine. A guard was sloppy or something. But the wand you had, it wasn't made by a human hand, was it? I doubt you noticed, but the goblins are on your side."

Snape did feel, and display, surprise at that revelation. Goblins? The tunnel had been empty when he'd first arrived, but then...he searched deeper. He found old, dusty crates, some food, some healing supplies, a handful of wands.

Someone had helped him. Snape was stupid to assume it had been luck.

"You didn't even know you had a benefactor, eh? Tricksy goblins are the worst. Plots within plans within riddles. They would have carved you up eventually, but too bad for you."

"Goblins, you say. Nothing's crueller than a Potter, you toad spawn."

The mouthy twin stooped to the ground and picked up some small pebbles. "Father told us about you. Your stalking of our mother during their school years; your cruel pranks which father and his friends answered with even worse ones. They were excessive, I

once thought, but now I wonder if they didn't go far enough. Still, to try this stunt, you must be damaged in the brain."

The other twin tugged on the mouthy one's arm. "Harry, let's go. You can find a new twig to use. Send a messaging spell."

"Good idea, Christopher. The light isn't that far away. Go see if you can find something. This feels like the goblins have maintained wards on this tunnel. It might be blocking Sirius and the others from finding us, right?"

"You sure?"

"I'll be right behind you, brother."

The one called Christopher, the one who looked precisely like a young James Potter, the one who'd stabbed Severus through his shoulder, retreated.

Severus bled on the floor. He had taken a few days to rest and heal, but he wasn't by any definition strong. A little sword wound and he was on the ground like an infant. There were days in the past when Severus could have withstood twenty seconds of the Cruciatus without flinching externally.

"You made a mistake. You thought us defenseless. You thought us unwanded and easy prey. Let me tell you this, Severus Snape, I am never defenseless."

Harry wandlessly banished the handful of small stones in his hand into and through Snape's head. The dead Death Eater looked like the victim of a muggle-style gun.

Harry, to be fair, used shaped wooden sticks, not true wands, when dueling or practicing magic. He didn't need the little prop. He used it only to keep from exposing the depth of his magic. His family knew, even Sirius and Remus, but none of his other teachers or tutors did. No one outside the family knew.

Harry walked from the tunnel to hear Sirius shouting and, likely, hugging Christopher. Harry waved his hand behind him. A large cascading fall of stone and earth sounded. Harry had just collapsed

a magically warded tunnel without a word or a spell. Pure will; the purest of all magic.

"Christopher got Snape good. The transfiguration failed because of all the goblin magic. Goblins! Then Snape flopped around so much he triggered a cave-in. I just barely got out in time. I fear that the Aurors won't be returning the man to Azkaban."

Potters knew how to tell stories to keep each other safe.

Sirius nodded. "Here's a wand for you, Harry. We'll have to get Christopher a new one."

The Aurors would demand to see Sirius and Remus' memories of this event, but they couldn't ask for the children's memories by law. The story would hold.

There was the truth – that Harry had killed his first person before he turned eleven – and then there was the Potter truth – that Snape had brought down the tunnel on himself. Potters did not leave enemies in a position to harm the family.

The only exception was the goblins. It wasn't a single goblin who desired vengeance against the Potters; it seemed to be all of them, goaded on by the worst of their wizard-hating bigots. This stunt, Harry knew, would be enough for his dad to call upon the magic of the goblin bloodstone.

The goblins had done this to themselves.

They would cease to exist within Britain in hours for their assistance to Severus Snape. Their vendetta against the Potters would cost them all their lives.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James and Evangeline Potter grounded Christopher and Harry for the rest of the summer for the dangerous little stunt they'd pulled. James had also poured a vast sum of money into updating the wards. One thing Remus had discovered seemed especially promising...if they could make it work in a warded form.

The rest of the wizarding world debated what exactly had happened to cause the Gringotts to collapse, killing all the goblins in Britain. Most of the more knowledgeable wizards expected that goblins had brought down their own tunnels by being overzealous in digging for gold, silver, and precious stones.

Diagon Alley was temporarily closed while magical engineers surveyed the place to determine if the Gringotts damage would undermine the integrity of other shops.

These related issues meant no flying for a few weeks and triple the amount of homework. (Idle hands were dangerous hands, after all.)

The Ministry gladly announced that Severus Snape had died in a tunnel collapse. The man had evidently used some magic in an already weakened tunnel – so, in effect, he caused his own death. The Potters wholeheartedly agreed that Snape had killed himself...but rather because he had kidnapped the Potter twins than any magic he'd used in the tunnel.

Evangeline spent a lot of time with both Christopher and Harry talking about what had happened. She wasn't a Healer; she wasn't a muggle doctor; but she did have a sympathetic ear and she did pass the Potter twins test when James was dating her (unlike thirteen other 'applicants' who all failed it).

The boys hoped they'd gotten away without a yelling.

Wrong!

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The yelling from James Potter came a week after Severus Snape's failed kidnapping plot. He sat his twins down and laid into them.

"You both knew better and you still walked into danger. That man had seen you two and sat out in the forest torturing an animal to try to make you come out of the wards.... And it worked. You both know better. Christopher, you just ran off even after Harry suggested sending an elf. They can defend themselves and would have discovered it was a trap. And, Harry, you ran after him. You had a lick of sense to send off a messaging spell...but you ran after him.

You should have stunned your brother, you know that, don't you? Neither of you should have gone past those wards without adults...."

The yelling went on for just over twenty minutes. Both boys had hoped the delay in punishment, save for the grounding and extra homework, meant that James would be more reasonable. Wrong!

"I love you both, but I can't stand to think of what would have happened if he's just killed you outright. You're both alive because of your attacker's stupidity, his underestimating you, and his need to gloat. There are smart enemies in the world. You have to protect yourselves better...and protect each other. Christopher, if Harry suggests something is a bad idea, listen to him. Harry, if Christopher gets nervous about something, follow his lead. Do you understand?"

Both boys nodded. "Fine, then the last part of your punishment. The stables. You have a week to clear them out...without magic. Perhaps blistered hands and sore muscles will remind you to think first, eh?"

James hugged both his boys. He had been more terrified for them than angry with them. However, he couldn't let their behavior pass unremarked upon.

The twins groaned and accepted the punishment. They had been envisioning far worse. Cleaning out the stables would take a long time, given they still had massive piles of homework to complete daily, but it wasn't as bad as...other things. One time James had assigned his little troublemakers to cleaning out the attic after they'd accidentally blown up a good portion of Lily's old Potions lab.

Cleaning out hundreds of years of dust and broken toys and moth-ridden clothing was worse than the stables. Christopher hated dark places and Harry wasn't too fond of spiders or their webs. The attic was like a lake of inky darkness tacked onto the fourth floor of the Manor – and every spider within twelve kilometers seemed to have made it home. The idea gave both boys the shivers.

"You will also be expected to help the warding team I've hired from America. They will be here a week from Thursday, just before your birthday. If you don't do a good job, the party will be off and it will just be a small family gathering. Do you both understand why I'm so angry?"

"Yes," Harry said.

"I do," Christopher said.

"Take care of each other. Be safe. Above all, be safe." The tension in the room receded. "Now, you scamps, I believe there is some fine manure that needs moved from the stables. Old clothes."

The Potters were the oldest of the pureblood families still intact, but they didn't believe in coddled little princelings. James had turned out that way, but he chalked it up to being an only child born late in life to his aging parents.

Christopher and Harry both knew physical labor, from the stables to helping with the gardens to fencing lessons to Quidditch, football, and the other sports they played on a regular basis.

The boys were out in the stables ten minutes later. It would end up taking twenty-five solid hours of work from each of them to clean the place out.

"Why do we need so many horses?" Christopher complained.

"Dad likes to ride, so do Melisse and Athena. It's just you and I who like brooms more than anything else."

"Brooms don't shit," Christopher said.

"Thank Merlin."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Christopher and Harry remained grounded well past their birthday, but they were able to have friends over from time to time. Christopher considered Terry Boot his best friend, while Harry was more circumspect. He enjoyed playing games with the people who came over, but he took no one but his dad and his brother into his confidence.

It had been a few years since James had explained the crazy prophesy that Dumbledore had hid from all, save Voldemort's spy. Harry had something of an idea of what was coming. He came off as

a bit cold in public, but it was mainly to keep the people around him safe.

One couldn't enjoy life in public and still be watchful at the same time. They didn't mesh well together.

However, it was the day when the warding team came over that Harry knew what his destiny was. He'd become a superb duelist, but it was warding he really wanted to master.

Instead of his usual reticent self, among non-family members, Harry was absolutely chatty with the seven wizard team. Each of them answered at least a dozen questions from the kids who were supposed to be their helpers.

James watched the scene and couldn't suppress the smile. He was sure that Harry would do a few trips on the dueling circuit, but he needed something else to fall in love with. Harry wasn't a natural politician; Christopher would fill that mold much better with his love of people and healing and such. But Harry had powerful magic and an even more powerful mind.

James wondered if Harry would stick with warding as a profession. He had the raw power to be the very best in the business. A team lead by an experienced Harry Potter wouldn't need seven wizards; it would be just Harry and one or two assistants.

James watched the star struck Harry cozy up to the warders while Christopher looked put upon having to lug around ward stones and fetch drinks and stuff. James stood near the lead warder and asked a few questions of his own.

"Did you thoroughly test out the experimental schematic that Remus and I sent you?"

Corbin Eaglewisp was from a long line to wizards, all of whom specialized in warding. People wondered why they couldn't find the famed City of Gold...well, an Eaglewisp was responsible many generations earlier for hiding it.

He and his family had made a business out of warding. The filthy goblins had kept a virtual monopoly in Britain and a few other places

so this was among the first jobs Corbin had ever done here. Good thing the goblins had imploded themselves.

"Yes, Mr. Potter," the master warder said. "It's an interesting schema, stable. I wasn't quite sure what it was intended to do? It has something to do with detecting...and restraining dark arts practitioners if my guess is right."

"You're very close. It's actually a bit more specific than just a dark arts practitioner, but the exact details we'll keep secret. We have problems with blood purist terrorists over here. I'm rather infamous for my anti-pureblood sentiments so I'm a bit of a target. Two of my children, the messy haired ones over there, were kidnapped earlier this summer briefly by one such terrorist...."

"I understand," the warder said. "The green eyed boy seems rather fascinated, doesn't he?"

"He'll be a formidable duelist, but I think he's already sizing up warding as a mainstay profession. He's got the mind and the magic for it...all it would take is the will."

"I haven't worked on wards this old in some time. Would you like us to recharge some of the weaker ones?"

"I didn't know anything wasn't at full strength," James Potter said with a touch of concern.

"Yes, there are fifteen different schema at work so far, before you count the new ones we're laying down today. Three of them are rather weak."

"What do they do?"

"One forms a physical barrier to prevent those not keyed in from entering. That is traditionally the front line defense of a warding structure. Another is the notification ward to tell the wardholder about things happening to the wards. The third is the primary offensive ward: it stuns any who attempt to attack the wards or weaken them."

James blanched. Those three were the most powerful and ancient aspects of the wards.

"How did those three weaken so much more than any of the others?"

Corbin pointed James toward one of the rune stones his team was unearthing. "Someone has tampered with the main stones. Fairly recent, maybe within ten or fifteen years. It looks like someone not keyed into the wards as well, a very powerful magic user."

Dumbledore was the only candidate on James' mind. Even after the man had been insane for a decade he was still causing havoc.

"Any idea why the wards didn't tell me they were weak?"

"If someone had drained the energy with a device or a spell, they would have. However, someone attacked the rune stone and laid a very mild draining spell on it. The energy dumped into the earth rather than bracing up the ward. And there was a slightly faded Notice-Me-Not charm to keep anyone from investigating too closely."

Definitely Dumbledore. It was perhaps another way Dumbledore used to ensure that James, Lily, and the twins would go under his ridiculous Fidelius Charm. Failing wards on the Manor would drive a person to another solution; too bad no one noticed for ten years.

"Excellent catch. You'll be earning a hefty bonus just for that."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter."

James watched the rest of the proceedings with concern. He wanted to know what else Dumbledore might have ruined with his wards.

He also wanted to see if the new ward configuration was going to work.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Classes started for the Potter Experiment on August 21. Christopher, Harry, Terry Boot, and Parvati and Padma Patil made up the roster. Blaise Zabini had gone to Durmstang. James had declined Amelia's request to let Susan Bones try out the program. After all Amelia, Susan's aunt and guardian, hadn't even bothered supporting James' proposal in front of the Hogwarts Board of Governors.

A few other families heard of the program, but James looked into how they'd prepared for school – and it wasn't adequate. The Potter Experiment was designed, for now, to produce exceptional witches and wizards by adhering to the true old fashioned Potter Family methods. James had made minor tweaks here and there...and had added a few new subjects since students were last taught their formal educations this way. (Potters hadn't begun attending Hogwarts until the mid-1500s. Prior to that, they were all 'home schooled'.)

The five students had walked down the stairs or floo'd into the Potter Manor at seven thirty for breakfast. Students were required to eat two meals a day together. Now they awaited their first tutor.

The Potter Method called for using a major topic and quite a few minor topics each week. The major topic received a three hour block of time each school day for a week and then became a minor topic for the next several weeks while another class rotated into the major topic role. In ages past, the Potters had drawn upon family retainers and distant relatives to assist in the education of their young. James Potter hired the best possible people he could find in Britain and beyond to lead major topics on one week contracts.

He walked into the room with Ethelberta Basbush at his side. She was nearing ninety, but was still sharp as a tack.

"Morning class. Madam Basbush will begin the term by taking you through some of the theoretical and practical elements of herbology."

"Good morning," the aged witch said. Her tired charges piped back a response, although it wasn't very loud.

"We'll be exploring thirty non-magical and magical plants over the next week. How to identify them, how to care for them, how to use them in various potions and other preparations. There will be no essays due in this major class, but you will have an examination on this material on Friday afternoon."

James stood in the back for the rest of the short lecture and then accompanied the class out to the Potter Greenhouses. James watched as the class covered ginger root, belladonna, and

sparklewart. Madam Busbush even instructed her class in how to make a quick compound from the three plants they'd just studied: it was a rub that relieved the pain of sore muscles.

This is what James had wanted: not just the study of plants in isolation, but their relationship to other forms of magic, like potions. Tomorrow Madam Busbush intended to show off a few magical creatures that dined exclusively on particular magical plants.

James took the class when it was time for their physical activity hour before lunch. All five of his students were treated to ten laps of a rather challenging broom racing course. James had decided to mix the strenuous activities he planned with the more purely enjoyable. He figured it would earn him more smiles and more willing participants.

After lunch the students had four one-hour blocks of minor subjects every day. The schedule was always on the wall, but each week James, Evangeline (a Hogwarts Head Girl three years after Lily Evans had held the position), Remus, Sirius, Suresh Patil, or Chrysanthemum Boot would take a minor subject two times to ensure forward progress.

The list was daunting: English and writing skills; foreign language (first years completed their study of the classical languages), wand magics (a combination of charms, offensive magics, defensive magics, and transfiguration), runes, arithmancy and other mathematical systems, magical creatures, science (first years studied mostly astronomy), dueling practice, history, potions and herbology (which was already covered for this week with the major topic), and finance and politics.

The first day ended well. James was exhausted as was Remus, that day's teacher for history and English. The children had had their brains stretched out like it was pizza dough. So far the experiment was working.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

September 2, 1991 would go down in the record books as a very odd day.

First, it was the day when sixth year students at Hogwarts discovered that their DADA instructor wasn't inside the castle.

Second, it was the day when an odd, weak wizard named Quirrel apparated to the boundary of the Potter Manor and found himself stuck in the wards. Slowly over the first five minutes, the weak wizard with a strong voice in his head tried to unravel the wards and bindings that had fallen upon him. He remained stuck for quite some time.

Third, it was the first and only time the Potter Experiment was called off for a day and the majority of the pupils sent back to their houses.

Fourth, and not very well recognized, it was the day Voldemort truly perished.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

James leapt from his bed in shock when he felt the warning enter his mind from the wards. Intruder detected and restrained. Then he felt a second, unfamiliar warning.

He had slept in while his sons were off to class. He didn't need to be up and moving until eleven...particularly not after the way Evangeline had literally attacked him last night.

He threw on pants and a robe. He ran down the stairs, several levels of stairs, before he flew out of the main door. There...there in the distance was the immobilized intruder. Somehow this...person had triggered two of the wards: the intruder ward and the one that Remus Lupin had created.

James ran toward the figure and saw the man struggling in the wards.

He recognized the face from a file he'd read...one of the Hogwarts teachers, Quirrel, one that James had voted against, a buffoon for a DADA posting.

"How nice of you to visit," James said, before stunning the struggling man. The power of the wards held him upright even as James turned around to cancel the day's classes. He needed the Potter

Manor to be free of outside eyes for this. He also needed Sirius and Remus to assist.

Maybe some Knock-Out Potion to keep his little troublemakers from interfering. This looked like serious business.

James stalked inside the Manor and poked his nose inside the classroom on the first floor. "Excuse me, Mr. Moody, but we have a security situation. I'm going to need to escort Mr. Boot and the Patils to the Floo. I will call each of your parents later tonight to discuss what has happened. Mr. Moody, would you please keep an eye on Christopher and Harry?"

The slightly shaken Terry, Parvati, and Padma went to James without question and walked toward the main hall fireplace. Within a minute all three were home and safe. Another minute later and Sirius and Remus were both at the Potter Manor.

Alastor Moody, the hired instructor for the week's major section on dueling, thumped into the room with a pair of troublemakers behind him. "You going to fill in the holes in your earlier statement, James?"

James just pointed to the large window next to the front door. The man tangled up in the wards should be visible from there.

"Someone foolish to try to penetrate recently repaired and strengthened wards...ancient wards at that. Who is the fool?"

Alastor didn't know the secret of what had happened that Halloween night. James wasn't about to spill now. The half truth of Quirrel and his likely companion was good enough.

"He's a Hogwarts teacher. Probably trying some last minute ploy to get my children to attend. Still, I stunned him and planned to save the interrogation until after I got the students out of here. I wonder if I should clear out the rest of the Manor, my wife and all my children?"

"I'm staying," Harry said.

James wanted to scowl but didn't. Children shouldn't have to know the full range of unpleasant truths until the very last possible moment.

"Me, too, then," Christopher piped in.

"Alastor, would you accompany Evangeline and the girls to our home in the Orkneys?"

"Be glad to, James, unless you need another wand here...." Alastor loved the idea of a home invasion attempt. Wizarding law said the guilty party was completely at the mercy of the family they'd tried to breach.

Five minutes later, his nervous wife and curious daughters were out of the Manor. Alastor had to be convinced to really get in the Floo and accompany them. He really wanted to stay behind to...help.

Sirius looked doubtful at Christopher and Harry remaining behind. "Are you sure about this, James? I don't think...."

"I need to be here, Padfoot," Harry said. "Christopher needs to be here, too. Dad's face when he came into the classroom told me exactly what he thought he found. I will see it through to the end."

James wondered if Harry might have it in him to be the best kind of politician...after he tried his hand at dueling, warding, and any other fields of interest.

James led the subdued procession down to the ward line.

"Did a wizard let Voldemort possess him," Remus wondered aloud. He was examining the ward he'd created from a hypothesis and a good understanding of runes. "Did he really condemn himself to death when the spirit left him? It wouldn't have been anything to host a spirit for an hour or five, but for days, for long enough to become symbiotic? It was suicide."

James nodded. It was always suicide to attack the Potters.

The small group gathered around the stunned and immobilized Quirrel. James sent a quick spell to allow the man's head to function.

Remus continued to cast a multitude of detection charms. Finally he grimaced and stopped. He had the confirmation he needed.

Quirrel slowly brought his turban-covered head up and snarled. "Just the ones I wanted to see."

He paused. His body, still immobile, almost seemed to jerk to life...but nothing happened. "What is this magic?"

"We created it for you," a precocious Harry Potter said. He hadn't been in on the planning and research for this ward...but he had watched the warding team lay it into place. Could an eleven-year-old already understand its purpose?

"Harry is right. Albus told us, unwillingly, about the prophecy years ago. He manipulated you into attacking and starting the prophecy. We've had evidence for years that you weren't dead; even found one of your trinkets...."

Quirrel's hate-filled eyes went blank and a swirl of black smoke erupted from the back of the man's head.

"Voldemort," Sirius whispered, rather in awe.

The Voldemort-smoke couldn't make it through the wards. Something in the wards was meant specifically to bind spirits.

"We've been experimenting with different ideas, you see," James said. "I think we have just the thing."

Sirius, Remus, and James leveled their wands at the smoke and began chanting in a Celtic dialect. Remus had discovered the demi-ritual in a historical book on Celtic rituals: it was meant for cleaning the site of a massacre from the lingering sadness and spiritual hatred. The book reported it had been used to banish vicious poltergeists as well.

The whitish light of the wards surrounding the black smoke became unbearably bright. The smoke began to...vanish as the white light surrounding it overpowered what was left of Voldemort's soul.

A few minutes later the threat of Voldemort was gone.

His horcruxes hadn't saved from death this time. They worked against general forms of death, but not ones meant to exorcise restless spirits, not ones designed to destroy spiritual wraiths.

Even ghosts could die.

The gathered looked at Quirrel's lifeless body. It only took James a few minutes to concoct an explanation. One of Voldemort's supporters, an unmarked follower, took a position at Hogwarts when the Potter twins were expected to start in order to kidnap them...to get a more detailed explanation of what happened to his master so many years ago. He didn't count on vastly strengthened wards or his own actions causing the wards to react violently.

The Aurors came and left within two hours. James provided a pensieve memory – slightly modified to eliminate the black Voldemort myst – of what had happened. The man died in the wards without anyone else nearby.

Quirrel would go down as a weak wizard overall. Not even strong enough to pass through wards without suffering a heart attack.

Sometimes, most of the truth was safer than the whole truth.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: That concludes what I had sketched out for this storyline. It was surprisingly fun to write. Hope you enjoyed James Potter. I haven't seen enough stories with him being a good, decent person.

Politicians Run the Asylum

A/N: Fifth year alternate storyline. Ministry-controlled assassins just tried to kill Harry, so why would he stick around for a trial from the same Ministry that failed to kill him? This smart Harry flees and does his damage politically and through the media.

I love the Dementor episode in OOTP for its fanfiction possibilities. I even wrote a comic version of the consequences of Harry getting convicted for underage magic; DobbyElfLord wrote a wonderful one-shot on Harry abandoning the magical world and fulfilling his destiny with skills learned in Her Majesty's Army. Here is yet a different twist.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry propped himself up on his elbow after the Dementors fled the alley. He vomited out what little he'd last eaten and then looked to Dudley. His worthless cousin looked like a quivering panna cotta.

He struggled with his cousin's bulk as he made his way back to his aunt and uncle's house. In theory, he could have left Dudley in the alley – surely his cousin, had the positions been reversed, would have done just that. But, Harry was Harry...so he lugged his bullying git of a relative home.

Harry dumped Dudley in the television room and then bounded up the stairs. He quickly threw all his belongings in his trunk and was glad to see Hedwig in her cage. It was like third year when he'd blown up Aunt Marge – but worse. He needed to flee; there wasn't anyone he felt he could trust right now.

The Ministry had just tried to kill him.

Those Dementors only responded to the Ministry, like when they'd surrounded Hogwarts trying to search for Sirius Black a few years earlier, so only the Ministry could order them to attack Harry.

He bounded down the stairs to hear his aunt and uncle bellowing in fear and pain. They must have found Dudley.

"I was attacked by my kind's Ministry. You're not safe any longer. Leave this place," Harry said, "and never think of me again."

He was out the door before Vernon could even respond. Harry summoned the Knight Bus and made his way to Diagon Alley. It was on about eight o'clock when a disheveled Harry appeared inside Gringotts with all his earthly possessions.

A goblin looked at him and frowned. "Wizard, what do you want?"

Harry stumbled over to the teller. "I want a goblin portkey to America. I want...I want all my assets transferred to Gringotts Boston." It was the best sort of plan he'd been able to cobble together in his few minutes on the Knight Bus. Run, hide, regroup.

The goblin snarled. "There is no such thing as a goblin portkey. We're prohibited from using wands." Harry knew about the prohibition, but hadn't Binns said that no Ministry edict actually kept the goblins from doing whatever they wanted?

"Fine. I want all my gold converted to British pounds. Now."

"Key please." The goblin looked ready to bite through steel bars.

Harry handed over the tiny gold key and the goblin snarled again, this time in a sort of pain.

"Snarlrock will escort you to a supervisor's office." Harry's account was apparently large enough that the goblins didn't want to lose it entirely.

Harry's sheer terror at the idea of staying in Britain kept him negotiating for twenty minutes before he got exactly what he wanted: a portkey and all his assets transferred to America. He discovered, through the behavior of the goblins rather than anything they said, that he had more wealth than he'd expected. He filed that nugget away; he had his safety to worry about, not whatever ridiculous games were happening.

Harry gathered up his belongings, and Hedwig in her cage, and activated the portkey. He appeared many, many minutes later inside a non-descript gray room with a bureaucrat of some type manning the door.

"Welcome to America, traveler," the man at the door said. "Do you have your passport?"

"No," Harry said. "I want to claim political asylum."

The magic words. The bureaucrat was now obligated to hear Harry out. The goblins had muttered out that much in between hoping that Harry died a painful death and that he never, ever reveal the source of his portkey.

"On what grounds?"

"The magical government of Britain tried to assassinate me two hours ago."

The bored bureaucrat looked shocked at the claim. "Your proof?"

Harry shrugged and realized he only had the memory. "Do you have a pensieve? I could show you the attack."

"I can get one. But even I see it, how will I know that the Ministry was behind it?"

"The Dementors in Britain are only under Ministry control. Two of them tried to kill me and my cousin. Then the folks there had the gall to summon me to a Ministry hearing to pronounce me expelled from school – probably so they could leave me defenseless and try again."

The bureaucrat nodded.

"Here's the letter expelling me. Then a second one calling me to a hearing. If you'll get a pensieve...."

The bureaucrat used his wand to send off a spell. The gray room fell into silence while Harry and the bureaucrat waited. The man obviously didn't want to believe, but he was obligated to hear out the case.

Another bureaucrat, even more bored looking, showed up with a pensieve. "What you need this for, Michaelson?"

"Political asylum request," the original bureaucrat said, looking at Harry.

"Awfully young. Alright, young man, go ahead and do your worst."

Harry stuck his wand to his forehead – he learned about pensieves after seeing and falling into Dumbledore's the year previous – and pulled out a few minutes worth of a memory. He dipped the silvery strand into the stone bowl.

"Go ahead. You'll forgive me if I don't care to relive this again."

The original bureaucrat dipped his head in while the newer one stood guard over the valuable pensieve itself.

When he popped out, the man's bored expression was gone. He gestured for the bureaucrat who'd brought the bowl to take a look.

"Now, what did you call that...thing?"

"Dementor. The British Ministry uses them to guard its prison, Azkaban, and also to kill selected convicts."

"I'm sold," the bureaucrat said. "But, tell me why you think they'd want to kill you."

"I witnessed something that very few people want to believe. I caught a glimpse of a newspaper before I got the portkey here. They're making me out to be insane in my home country. That's one tactic, I suppose, but better for everyone if I were dead...at least as these people think."

"What exactly did you see?"

"You've heard of Voldemort?"

"British Dark Lord killed by...Harry Potter." The man stopped and actually looked at Harry. "I guess that was you."

Harry nodded. "I saw the ritual he used to resurrect himself. He's back in a body again and the Ministry would rather kill me than admit it. Bunch of cowering, self-protecting retards are going to get everyone in Britain killed. They'd deserve it, too." Harry was muttering to himself by the end.

"I'd like to see this ritual, if you don't mind," the bureaucrat said.

Harry nodded. "After your colleague...."

Said man pulled his head out of the bowl. "How the...HELL...did you survive those things? I felt depressed and utterly sad just watching your memory."

"It's a long story, but I learned the Patronus Charm a few years ago. It's the only way to handle Dementors or Lethifolds."

"Holy Merlin...."

The first bureaucrat got his colleague calmed down and then motioned for Harry to take back the old memory and put the one of Voldemort's resurrection into the bowl.

Harry had a horrible look on his face when he did so. Both the Ministry workers stuck their heads in the bowl this time. Apparently they no longer considered Harry a crank.

Harry began to plan further ahead. It looked likely he would win some kind of permission to stay in the U.S. Perhaps he needed to show them a few more memories, set up a safe haven for Sirius, too.

He set up a few more steps in a plan. He didn't know where it would end, but he knew it wouldn't have him returning to Britain any time soon.

The bureaucrats returned from the memory thirty minutes later. Both of them looked ready to heave all over the floor.

Harry felt a tug of grim satisfaction. It was the first time he'd seen someone else's reaction to the events of that night.

The first bureaucrat looked at his colleague and said, "Get the duty Undersecretary. We're going to need someone high level to approve political asylum."

Harry seemed gladdened by the words. "I wonder if I could apply for a second person as well. He was sentenced to Azkaban prison without trial – and is in fact innocent. My godfather, a few friends, and I discovered the real criminal a few years back but no one would believe us."

The bureaucrat nodded toward the bowl. "Put the memory in there. I'll look at it with the duty Undersecretary. If it's anything like these first two memories, I don't doubt you'll prove your case."

Harry waited and petted Hedwig and tried to remain calm. He'd been attacked less than four hours ago. His pulse still raced and he was beginning to feel a bit sickly from the stress and excess of adrenaline.

"You need some water, Mr. Potter, or perhaps a bit of food?"

Harry nodded. "Thanks!"

The bureaucrat reached over to a bag on the back of a chair. He threw a water bottle and a packet of crisps over to Harry. It wasn't Hogwarts feast food, but it would do for now.

Harry had a gunky set of fingers from the coating on the crisps when the door opened again and a man in formal robes walked in. Harry tried to rub the crumbs off on his Dudley-cast-off-specials. He stuck out his mostly clean hand and shook the eager hand of this new bureaucrat.

"Mr. Potter, what a pleasure and an honor. I've just been filled in on the trying circumstances you find yourself in. The United States of America would be glad to offer you political asylum."

"Thank you, sir...."

"I am Caleb Peachtree, of the Georgia Peachtrees. Undersecretary of Wizarding Cooperation for Europe and the Middle East. A fan of the British Quidditch League, as well, Mr. Potter. I saw a bit of one of your school games on a set of omnioculars."

Harry just nodded. This man would be sympathetic. "Sir. I would also request asylum for my godfather. Perhaps you'd like to see the events in the pensieve?"

"A pleasure, sir." The original bureaucrat and this Mr. Peachtree stuck their heads in the pensieve.

It was nearly an hour later before the two men returned from their watching. Harry had been speaking to Hedwig about delivering a letter to Sirius. His owl seemed to have a lock on where he might be hiding out these days.

"Amazing, Mr. Potter. I heard something about this misadventure with the Dementors near a school for young witches and wizards. But to see the Minister being so cavalier. I've always thought the man a fool, but now you've provided genuine proof."

"I have a bit more I could show you on the man. He's worse than a fool. He's in the pocket of Voldemort's leading Death Eater. Ignorance, bought and paid for."

Mr. Peachtree's face darkened. "Yes, well, perhaps we should plumb the depths of your recollections in the morning. It will be rather late for you, Mr. Potter. Let us get your paperwork squared away – and a set for your godfather, who is clearly the victim of a massive travesty of justice – and we'll see if we can't find you someplace to stay for the next few days...."

"You needn't worry about that. The goblins are transferring my accounts from London to Boston."

"Very well, then. If you'll follow me, we'll get you the muggle and magical paperwork you'll need."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Mr. Peachtree was beyond ecstatic. He had been arguing that the American Department of Magic was wrong in listening to the bizarre things spewing out of the British Ministry. Now he had firsthand evidence of their deep venality and corruption. An assassination attempt on a teenager; proof that their Voldemort problem was real; evidence after evidence that they imprisoned people without trial. Were they so stupid as not to ask for a pensieve memory in Britain? Peachtree nodded absently to himself. They were stupid.

Taking a few minutes to corroborate a fantastical story was part of the job in running a magical government; strange things could happen...and did all the time. Perhaps he'd drop an anonymous tip to Tempus magazine, see if they couldn't do a story on Harry, reprint some of his more...incriminating memories. The British buffoons

needed to be exposed for what they were before they caused another world war. Few recognized it, but British wizards (and not always dark ones) were responsible for starting the first two declared muggle world wars in addition to numerous wizard-only wars. Bunch of bungling, meddlesome fools.

Diplomacy wasn't always fought in the corridors underneath the Boston Common, was it? Mr. Peachtree would take every opportunity he could. Perhaps it was time to see if Intelligence might be interested in Mr. Potter, as well.

Interesting. Promising.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A few hours later, as Harry really began to feel the day's events, he left the Department of Magic and stepped off the escalator onto a deserted portion of the Boston Common. The British built their Ministry under an office building; the Americans went for something vastly more beautiful. They had floated the rumor, backed up with magic, that there was an abandoned multi-level car garage under the Commons when it really was their Department of Magic.

Harry hailed a cab after setting Hedwig free with a letter and a special portkey for Sirius Black. She was ready for a good flight after being cooped up for so long. Who knew how or when Sirius would respond. The Americans offered him freedom and asylum; the British only the likelihood of capture or death.

He stuffed his trunk in the back of the cab and then consulted the sheet of paper that Mr. Peachtree had given him. "Take me to the Copley Square Marriot."

Twenty minutes later, Harry finally passed out in one of the most comfortable beds he'd ever known. He was alive, safe, and finally able to rest.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry woke up around noon the following day when his phone rang and he heard the deep Southern American drawl of Mr. Peachtree on the other end.

"Mr. Potter, I wonder if we could request your presence for three o'clock back at the Department?"

Harry rubbed his eyes and looked toward the alarm clock. "Yeah, that'll give me time to get ready."

"Excellent, a guard in the Entry Hall will bring you to my office."

Harry hung up the phone and stretched. A lot had happened in one day. It was a minor miracle that Harry was still alive. He showered and then left the hotel. His temporary home was connected to a shopping mall, so he decided to try American food for the first time.

He walked into a chain restaurant called Chili's and had the greasiest, and tastiest, burger he'd ever laid eyes upon. He felt a bit sick afterwards...but in a good way.

He made it back to the Department of Magic with five minutes to spare...and a long outline of a plan crawled on a couple of napkins he'd started writing on at Chili's.

Harry let the guard escort him deep down into the Department of Magic before they arrived at the Division of Wizarding Cooperation. Mr. Peachtree had a large office and an effusive smile as he beckoned Harry inside.

There were two other individuals already seated there. Mr. Peachtree shook Harry's hand and then pointed to the others. "Mr. Weaver is from our Intelligence Division and Mr. Browne works with our Secretary of Magic. They were both interested in meeting you and discussing...er, some options with you."

Harry smiled and nodded. Some strange things had stopped phasing him a while back.

"I have my own list of items to discuss, Mr. Peachtree. Why don't you go first?"

Mr. Peachtree looked toward the Intelligence official who then began to speak. "Mr. Potter, I wonder if you'd be willing to share a few memories with us. We've heard...some rather interesting things out of England the past few years. It would be nice to confirm our other sources."

Harry nodded. "That's simple enough. I would ask not to have to see any of the more unpleasant ones again."

Mr. Weaver nodded. Mr. Peachtree brought out a massive pensieve, larger than the one Harry had used the night before.

"We heard rumors about a battle for a magical artifact created by Nicholas Flamel."

Harry nodded and pulled the memory from his head.

"We were also informed of a certain diary that had unusual properties of possession and such."

Harry repeated the memory-pulling procedure. The Intelligence division person requested any memories Harry had of Minister Fudge. Harry had a few to share. Finally, the spymaster requested memories of Harry speaking in private with Albus Dumbledore.

"May I ask why?"

"There will be a fuller briefing later, but we have been interested in his recent activities. We know he's been holding some rather surprising secrets and we wonder what he's discussed with you."

Harry added several more strands of memories to the bowl.

All three looked eager to jump into the pensieve, but the one introduced as Mr. Browne handed Harry a thin file folder. "Our Secretary of Magic thought you should be informed of this as soon as he learned you'd...emigrated to America. We can discuss any questions you might have about this material after we return."

The three officials dipped their heads into the pensieve while Harry opened the file. It was his file, as pieced together by the Americans. It took Harry more than a few minutes to consider how strange it was that American spies considered him interesting enough to pull together this file on him.

He read the cover sheet with a bit of awe. He'd never known he had a godmother (Fentrice McKinnon, deceased) or that his paternal

grandfather had been Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot prior to Albus Dumbledore taking the post.

He discovered it was a good thing he was so open-ended in his request to the goblins, as it seemed Harry had three vaults at Gringotts. He would have to make sure that the goblins transferred all of them. He had evidently been right about why the goblins finally gave in to his demands: Harry was a seriously wealthy wizard.

He grew angry when he saw a sheet detailing Harry's trips to different hospitals with different injuries; he saw the names of the wizards dispatched by someone to ensure Harry wasn't removed from his family by the case workers; he saw a list of injuries reported by the school nurses, but (oddly) never followed up on.

Harry was mad that the Americans knew but did nothing...and it made him wonder how much more the British knew. Had they stopped people from helping him? Had the wizards been responsible for more of the pain he'd felt, more than he'd ever known or suspected?

Harry continued flipping through the file. All his grades from Little Whinging were in there; all his grades, ones he'd never seen, from Hogwarts, including formal comments from the faculty. It was eye opening.

Sprout had scathing things to say about Harry...especially considering her genial personality. It wasn't a secret that Harry didn't enjoy Herbology, but Harry had no idea Sprout had such a negative view of him and his academic prospects.

Snape's frothing, rabid comments and failing marks were what Harry had expected; Hagrid's were glowing; McGonagall was reserved; Flitwitch was refreshingly neutral and honest.

The items Dumbledore chose to contribute to Harry's apparently confidential file were mystifying. No wonder people like Fudge thought him insane. Dumbledore was no psychologist, but that hadn't stopped him from commenting wildly on Harry's motivations.

The lies Rita spread about Harry had first made their appearance in Harry's file: an attention-seeker in his first year, with his stunt to get

on his House Quidditch team; a potentially dangerous liability in his second year, with dark tendencies, gifts, and powers; suspected of aiding Sirius Black escape from imprisonment due to his sympathy for Black's causes; repressed rage coming through in Harry's misguided attempt to gain attention for himself by entering the TriWizard Tournament; a mournful assessment that Harry had likely murdered Cedric Diggory; a brief jot that discounted Harry's claim of having imagined the dark wizard Voldemort being reborn; notes that Harry should be monitored closely by the Suspensions Bureau of the DMLE.

Harry barely kept his anger in control. Why had Dumbledore written these things? He had always claimed to believe Harry, to support him. He had reported Voldemort's return to Fudge...but. But. BUT! His school wards weren't strong enough to keep out Voldemort in first year – or were they lightened to allow Voldemort in? He had never quashed the rumors of Harry being an ascending dark lord in his second year. He hadn't given Sirius a trial in third year, even though the man was innocent and Dumbledore was the head of the legislative and judicial branch of government. He hadn't cancelled the Tournament to prevent Harry's participation. He couldn't even keep Harry's supposedly safe home free from Dementors – or abusive relatives.

All the lies, all the omissions...all the shite in this file.

Why? Why had Dumbledore written these things he knew to be lies? Saying one thing to Harry; writing another in a permanent file, a document he could later produce to document his 'suspicions.'

Harry tucked his anger away and continued reading. Some of it was merely interesting; some of it made Harry want to scream, or to think that everything in here was lies...but he didn't know what to think.

He kept reading. The last page threw him for a loop. It was coded "Top Secret."

Harry James Potter

Intelligence Division, Arcane Research:

Confirmed referent of one British Prophecy (Sybil Trelawney to Albus Dumbledore), contents remain unknown

Suspected referent of one American Prophecy (Accession Number 1981-8730)

Long distance scan in 1988 revealed residue of death and soul magic present on Harry Potter (reference: horcrux)

Intelligence Division, Operations:

Scan of residence in 1988 indicates powerful ward of unknown composition and unknown effect; three incursion attempts by a division agent, a hired muggle thief, and a dark wizard under the Imperius Curse were successful

Target placed under observation by Suspensions Bureau, Department of Magical Law Enforcement in 1994, agents Dawlish and Skeeter

Harry didn't know what to believe. He didn't know what a horcrux was – or why he was tangled up in prophecies. Or why a reporter worked for the DMLE and helped to 'observe' or slander Harry. It was all so confusing.

He didn't have long to dwell on that, though, as the three American politicians pulled their heads out of the pensieve five minutes later.

Mr. Weaver, the spymaster, looked positively gleeful. Mr. Browne, who worked for the Secretary of Magic, looked ill. Mr. Peachtree, the Undersecretary of Wizarding Cooperation, looked ready to kill.

Harry began to trust the things he'd read in the dossier a bit more, but just a bit. Their reactions seemed genuine....

"That's been quite a life," Mr. Weaver said. "If you've read the report I handed you, you'll notice some differences between your memory of events and what Mr. Dumbledore has written about you. In case you're curious, confidential files are rather easy to obtain, if you know how to do it."

Harry nodded, numb.

"No one gets to the pinnacle of power in a government, as your Mr. Dumbledore has, without slashing his enemies and burying the half dead. You were, apparently, to be the next one to aid him in his

quest. Ten years tucked away in a house with abusive relatives. We knew but had no possible way to aid you, but I won't make excuses.

"At present, he wants to appear weak, we think, to draw out his opponents. He wanted them to slander him and you; then he wanted to destroy them in one fell swoop, make it appear that they overreached. He wanted to keep his hands lily white, for posterity's sake. We don't know when your role would outlast his interest in you; based on what's in that folder, we know he planned to be done with you at some point."

Harry just nodded, unable to form words.

"This Fudge person was a Dumbledore stooge at first, before Lucius Malfoy and a few others got their hooks into the weak-minded fool. Dumbledore's whispered comments and suggestions for glory became of less interest than the overt gold Malfoy and others paid him directly. But, he was more dangerous than even Dumbledore suspected. Our agents in Britain report that Dumbledore is furious about what happened...and about your disappearance. For now, he suspects you've been imprisoned in one of the Ministry's secret detention facilities."

"How does no one know this about him? About Fudge? Witches and wizards would rebel...."

Mr. Weaver waved Harry silent. "They might, possibly, if they ever knew. The Daily Prophet is hardly independent. All their investigative journalists are government employees in one form or other. The Suspensions Bureau is the old standing political arm of the DMLE. It takes care of vocal opposition: smears, disappearances, killings. They don't have a home in the Ministry building, but rather in an office tower a few blocks away."

"I don't understand at all...."

"Let me explain it this way, Harry," Mr. Browne said. "Dumbledore was part of a team of five who made it to Grindelwald's hidey hole. Four people died; Dumbledore walked out with a stunned Grindelwald. It cemented his reputation even though it was never clear what happened to the other four, one of them was a Great Uncle of your, the head of the Potter Family at that time. Also, no one ever determined how your grandfather, the Chief Warlock of

Britain at the time, died...just that he and his wife had finished up dinner with a third, unknown individual. Do you see where I'm going?"

Harry had an inkling. "There is no difference between Dumbledore and Voldemort, just that one has power and the other wants to usurp it."

Mr. Peachtree, who was obviously hearing these facts for the first time, too, looked up at the analogy. "A mite simple, Harry, but probably accurate."

Harry looked down at the Chili's napkins he had in his hand. His 'plan' was worthless. It wasn't enough just to hide in America. His problems were sure to follow him. So...what could he do?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Archibald Weaver looked at the small kid in front of him. The guy looked like his entire world had just died...but he wasn't filled with despair. He was looking for a way out, a solution.

This Potter kid had some kind of fortitude to be showing the kinds of actions he now did.

Mr. Weaver thought that Potter would be the perfect person to aid in the coming weeks and months. Around Potter, if the American prophecy were true, there would be productive chaos.

The boy could use a good deal of help. His schooling was for shit; his teachers had ignored all the learning issues the boy had; it was obvious from here that the boy's glasses, for instance, were completely unsuited for him. How he could play Quidditch when half blind was beyond his comprehension.

The Intelligence Division could free up some funds and resources to aid this kid. It wouldn't be exactly quid pro quo. Harry would need a lot more than he could directly return, save for the fact that he was going to give the Americans one thing they couldn't do for themselves.

Leaving aside comparisons of direct benefits, the Americans would wind up with the better bargain. Harry would get a life; but America

would rid itself of two terrorists who could easily slip the island borders they were currently boxed inside. The Americans didn't need anyone worse than that bin Laden, a Saudi wizard, running around the world causing havoc and chaos. Even the Muggles had him pegged as a threat.

Harry Potter was the key to American freedom...and he would never know that.

The best intelligence leads, after all, came from the least expected sources. If it was all as simple as listening charms and scrying orbs, no government would need someone like Mr. Weaver around, would they?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry sat in his seat tearing up the napkins he'd scribbled a plan on. He'd gotten away his entire life as a wizard flying by the seat of his pants. But...this. Voldemort and Dumbledore both had plans for him...the Americans seemed like they wanted to help, but who knew if they just wanted something from Harry, too.

Everyone looked at Harry as something to use, to abuse, to toss away. Harry would use these Americans and, depending on how they acted, he would be the one to dispose of them.

Harry was tired of people using him. He was done.

The meeting continued around Harry, but he wasn't paying attention to the words. He was trying to figure out how to get free.

Finally, he heard the door open and a woman step through. "Mr. Peachtree, you asked to know when Sirius Black arrived. He's in arrival suite 22 right now."

That was what Harry needed. Someone on his side. Someone to help him – while helping himself – someone to notice who was lying and who was telling the truth.

The old Sirius, the man trusting enough to be betrayed by a friend, wasn't who Harry needed. What he had was the new Sirius, the man who had evaded Ministry recapture for two years. Someone devious, someone who lived to see justice done – the Sirius who existed now.

Sirius would be glad to help Harry extricate himself from interlocked layers of problems. It was what a godfather was supposed to do, right?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Politicians Sometimes Lose Control

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry was the first person into international arrival room. "Sirius, you came!" He hadn't been so glad to see anyone...well ever.

"Harry, Harry. Calm down. Of course I would come. Even faster when there was a safe haven involved, right? You take me for a fool!"

His formerly thin and disheveled godfather wore a respectable set of clothes and seemed to have put on some weight.

"You don't look so...cadaverous any more."

Sirius barked out a laugh. "I eventually decided to stop living in caves and eating rats. Someone reminded me I could open up my mother's old townhouse in London without anyone being the wiser. Then I got your note; Tonks told me about the Dementor attack before I received it so I was more relieved than anything...."

"It gets worse, Sirius. A lot worse. I want you to promise me you'll listen to everything I have to tell you."

Harry's godfather nodded.

Harry looked over to Mr. Peachtree. "I think we're ready to return to your office, sir."

"Fine," Mr. Peachtree drawled out. "I dare say we haven't scratched the surface yet...if Mr. Weaver and Mr. Browne bear those expressions."

Mr. Peachtree handed Sirius a set of American identity cards and other paperwork. Sirius was considered an innocent man in America...just from someone showing off a memory. Wizarding justice could be swift and absolute only when absolute proof was available: memories witnessed in a pensieve; truth serums; analysis of spell residue. There were a lot of ways to get at the truth. Too bad the British didn't care.

Sirius couldn't stop staring at the papers in his hands while the rest of the group made it back to the Division of Wizarding Cooperation. Mr. Peachtree conjured up another chair for Sirius as everyone returned to their seats.

Harry knew the meeting was far from over. These people wanted something...perhaps not Mr. Peachtree so much as the other two, then again those two had given Harry his personal dossier and he'd discovered things he'd never thought possible.

"You said you wanted to discuss some options, right?" Harry asked. "I'd like to hear them today and have a day or two to think things over. Sirius needs some time to get up to speed."

Mr. Peachtree nodded and seemed to answer for the group. "It is a lot even for me, a spectator of sorts, to take in. Why don't we start with something that wouldn't take much time, but could do a lot of damage to the people who tried to hurt you? I think a public disclosure of what's been happening in Britain over the last few years is just the thing. Perhaps an interview with a journalist? Tempus magazine is our most respected news weekly; the Daily Wizarding Hub, here in Boston, is the leading newspaper in America. Take your time, read them, and pick out a journalist you wouldn't mind speaking with."

Harry looked to Sirius who seemed ambivalent, but still have a tentative smile.

"After Rita Skeeter, I'm a bit reporter shy." It wasn't a yes and it wasn't a no. "If I were to pick a name, I'd expect you folks to tell me if she or he was a government agent of some sort, you understand?"

Mr. Peachtree and Mr. Browne eagerly nodded. Mr. Weaver sat staring at Harry as if he were an interesting variety of animal not seen in recent memory.

Sirius waved a wand and conjured a bit of parchment and a quill. He began to write. He was on his best behavior for this meeting; it seemed he didn't want to do anything to jeopardize his new-found freedom in America.

Mr. Browne picked up the meeting at that point. "The Secretary of Magic would like to meet with you at some point, Mr. Potter...."

"Only if we can do it in secret. I'd rather no one knows I'm in America for the time being."

Mr. Browne nodded his assent to Harry's healthy amount of paranoia. "The Secretary also asked me to help arrange anything you'll need here. Permanent housing, schooling, any arrangements like that...."

"I can speak to some of that, Mr. Browne." Mr. Weaver had a small grin on his face. "The Secretary's office can arrange your placement at Salem or any other American school easily enough, but the people I work with might be able to do you something better. I won't go into details now, but just ponder whether you might be averse to one-on-one tutoring. We're also willing to supply a security detail once people discover you're in America."

Harry looked over all three of the men bearing gifts. "And what do you want from me? Everything has a price, I know."

Mr. Peachtree smiled. "I might ask for you to accept a short-term contract to advise some of our diplomats on the current realities in Britain. Show a few memories, outline the major players as you know them, answer some questions."

It seemed reasonable...so far.

"The Secretary of Magic wants his country safe," Mr. Browne said. "He wants your help to make sure the British troubles stay in Britain and get handled by the British as much as possible. We already have war wizards supporting the muggle warfare in Bosnia and Somalia. We haven't taken our wizards out of Iraq since the Muggles' Gulf War. We also have a bit of a stalemate with wizarding China. You shining a light on the problems there, from a safe perch here in America or elsewhere, will help to force the British to deal with their own issues. I, for one, don't think we want to have to go conquer Britain just to eventually turn it back over to a bunch of pureblood bigots...."

Sirius passed Harry the sheet of conjured parchment he'd been scribbling on.

"I don't want to say anything because I don't know if the room is secure from eaves-droppers, but I do have a bit to share with you about Dumbledore and the events back in Britain. It's not a pleasant story."

Harry nodded at Sirius, then turned his attention over to the spymaster, Mr. Weaver.

"My division has a bit of resourcing we could throw at the British problem, I suppose, but we'll need very good intelligence to do anything. We don't turn out soldiers, of course, but rather people with more...specialized skill sets. Mr. Potter could be useful in supplying memories for our trainers; we'd like to create models of the likeliest confrontation zones. Of course, I wouldn't be averse to recruiting Mr. Potter to come work for Intelligence, but he'd need about ten years more experience before he'd pass the entrance testing, I think."

That, to Harry, also sounded like the truth. Three people hadn't lied to him...but how to keep the odds on his side?

Sirius wrote another note on the parchment and shoved it to Harry. Harry pondered the suggestion for a moment before deciding.

"For my end," Harry said, "I will need Unbreakable Vows from anyone who knows I'm in the United States...you'll swear not to lie to me, intentionally place me in danger, or hide information from me. That would include the two men who helped me last night, your Secretary of Magic, and anyone else I meet or train...."

Mr. Peachtree seemed surprised and was about to suggest that the Secretary of Magic couldn't be expected to swear such an oath, although Mr. Peachtree himself was willing to.

However, Mr. Browne nodded and got the first word in. "We'd discussed just such a possibility. He's willing to do so when you meet with him."

Harry wondered just how desperate these people were for Harry's rather nebulous help. Or was it the public exposure of Britain's problems that they desired?

Harry thought he could have asked for more...but decided to keep his eyes open to see what else might be going on. Healthy skepticism would probably keep Harry healthy and alive.

As for Sirius, his godfather was worth his weight in gold so far.

The group debated the exact wording of the Vow for a few minutes before each of the three government officials spoke the words. Mr. Peachtree promised to have his subordinates take the Vow as soon as they could be found.

"It's past six now, Mr. Potter," Undersecretary Peachtree said. "Perhaps we can give you the rest of the evening to consider what you'd like to do with the options you have? I noticed you haven't really asked for anything yet, although I'd be surprised if you didn't have things you wanted from us, as well. Think it over."

Sirius nodded. Harry soon followed suit. Thirty minutes later they were in a two room suite at the Copley Square Marriott.

They had a lot to discuss.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius spent fifteen minutes erecting privacy wards in their hotel suite. Then he hugged his godson again. "It's damn good to see you, kid."

Harry smiled a rather watery smile himself. But he didn't cry at the rather strange reunion.

"I really didn't know if you'd come," Harry said.

"Of course I would. Although it was pure luck I was even able to. I cleaned up what I said back at the Department. The truth? I was basically a prisoner in my own home.

"Your owl found me when I was sitting in the backyard staring at the darkened sky. It took me three minutes to read the letter, gather up my wand and a few other things, seal the house up again, and take your portkey. The only reason I even opened up my mother's beastly house was that the Headmaster more or less extorted it from me. If I wanted to see you, he wanted it to be in a 'safe place.' He basically held you hostage to get at my mother's old house. Then he

wanted to ensure I stayed there, too, the doddering fool. Probably to keep you tied closer to him."

Harry grimaced but couldn't disagree with Sirius' assessment. He knew some of the truth about Dumbledore, but it still hurt to hear it.

"What do you think we should do...you know, with the Americans?"

"What do you want to accomplish?"

"I don't know where to even start," Harry said.

"Okay. I have what I want already. I'm here helping you; these people don't seem to consider me a convict or a fugitive from justice. As for you.... What does your world look like when it's all said and done? What does total victory look like?"

Harry's raised an eyebrow to the profound question from his godfather.

"I've never been asked that question.... I guess I'd be free of Voldemort, of his Death Eaters. Apparently, I'll be free of Dumbledore's plots, too. I'll finish my schooling, but not at Hogwarts. I'd have friends I could trust. I'd live in a country where people would just let me be."

Sirius scratched all Harry's comments down on some parchment. "It's a tall order, but now we have something to shoot for. We can figure out if anything the Americans offered will help you get where you want to go. For example, I doubt training you up as a hit wizard would do anything. You don't want your fame, right? So, we need to make sure someone or something else takes care of your problems over in Britain."

"What about telling my story to the press, showing them memories?"

Sirius nodded. "I think that will do three things: help Britain get out of its self-denial, get the focus onto fighting Voldemort, not capturing you, and (unfortunately) give away that you're moving about in the world. The people in Britain will panic and demand action; Fudge will likely hang onto power, but will have to start doing something; however, I think Dumbledore at the very least will attempt to get you

back in his clutches. Fudge may even divert a small contingent of Aurors to find you and try again..."

Harry held up a hand to stop Sirius' more morbid thoughts. "So, it brings us some advantages and a decent amount of risk. What if we cloud the issue of where I am? We pick a couple of journalists to release the story to. I meet one in the Bahamas...and another in Brazil...and a third in India. It's not hard for a wizard to move around."

Sirius smiled. A bit of misdirection appealed to the former prankster.

"We need to take this one step at a time, then. We get the benefits we can out of anything we do...and try to minimize the risks. You'll need a new wand, I think. That's how the Ministry tracks witches and wizards, through their wands. They could have found Voldemort any time they wanted during the first war, save for when he was under strong wards. They could track him even now...if they chose. Eventually they'll have hunting teams go out with portable detectors for you. We'll put your original wand in a warded box...and you can use a new, unregistered wand."

"They couldn't track you after you escaped from Azkaban because they'd snapped your wand, right?"

Sirius nodded. He had an excellent point about the Ministry, what it could do...and what it continually failed to do.

"They can even set a trap on certain words, say the incantation for the Cruciatus Curse, and then send off Auror Teams. But they never would do something so useful and productive."

"But, if someone like me suggested it was the most basic step in a war against Death Eaters...well, they'd be embarrassed into doing something like that," Harry said.

"Exactly."

"Let's see," Harry said, grabbing for the hotel supplied notepad. "We need one story about the Ministry trying to kill me because it didn't want to believe Voldemort was back. We need another concerning their track record with the innocent and guilty: your innocence, the late Ministry official Barty Crouch Senior smuggling his son out of

Azkaban. One on Dumbledore: effectively killing an ally, old Flamel, to bait a trap for Voldemort in my first year, letting in cursed possessions past his vaunted wards, permitting Dementors to nearly kill his students, not detecting his old friend Moody was an imposter."

"There's tons of stories, Harry, but we'll need to dole them out. Whenever the Ministry seems to have gotten the previous mess sorted out, hit them with a new one. Use the stuff on Dumbledore to distract him...."

"We need a warded safe house before we do anything. I'm just lucky I haven't used my wand up til now, otherwise I might have alerted Dumbledore or Fudge or maybe even Voldemort where I was."

Sirius started a new list.

Warded safe house

New wand for Harry; warded box for old wand

Set up media interviews; set up locations

Visit Gringotts Boston to ensure complete transfer

Schooling...

"Do you want to go to Salem?"

"They wouldn't be able to keep me being there a secret, would they?"

Sirius shook his head.

"So, we hire tutors and swear them to secrecy or we take up the Americans, eh?"

"I think the offer from the Americans might be a one-time deal. We could hire tutors later on if the deal with the Americans goes sour."

"You want me to take Mr. Weaver up on his offer?"

"I think he's not telling you everything, but it would be actions which would prove his intent. If his training is good, if you can establish your credentials, it's possible he would have been more forthcoming, yeah?"

Harry didn't like the idea of being a guinea pig for a spymaster...but perhaps there was something to be gained aside from just the training.

"We'll leave that open. How do I make sure my friends are safe in Britain?"

"You first need to be sure if your friends are friends. Dumbledore doesn't have your interests at heart; Pettigrew betrayed James, Lily, all of us. Make sure of all your friends before you tell them anything important."

Harry hated that suggestion, but he knew he had to follow it.

"I can charm a parchment with a light secrecy spell. Write them, tell them you're well, ask them to be safe and also to keep your letter a secret. Promise...promise to write again in a week or two. We'll keep a recording duplicate here. If they break the secrecy spell, the parchment we keep will turn grey. If they show someone else the letter, it will turn black."

"I hate to do that to my friends...."

"Perhaps they'll be faithful like Remus was; perhaps they'll turn out to be skuzzy rats. It's their choice, not yours."

Harry nodded. The rest of the evening passed with a bounty of food from room service and a lot of stories and laughter.

"It's better than rats," Sirius said, of his food.

Harry laughed and raised a glass of wine toward his godfather.

"It's better than Dursley prison. Now we just have to stay free."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

August 4 – International Magical Times

Harry Potter Survives Attempt on Life by British Ministry

Sao Paulo – Two weeks ago, the British Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter, was survived an attack by two Dementors, dark creatures controlled by the British Ministry as guards for the island prison Azkaban. His memory of the event is replayed on page 5; note, it is not for young children or the faint of heart.

(Memory expert Oscar Willibur of the Massachusetts Institute of Technomancy confirmed that the duplicated memory has not been fabricated or altered in any way.)

Asked why the Ministry attempted to kill the fifteen year old wizard, Harry Potter responded, "At the end of May, I witnessed and was forced to participate in the rebirth of the dark wizard called Voldemort. He didn't die all those years ago; he was weakened and bided his time. His supporters weaseled their way out of prison sentences and some took positions in the government. The Ministry of Magic is filled with Voldemort's supporters. It is not a safe place for those who oppose Voldemort."

(View the rebirthing ceremony with Harry's descriptions of what was happening, pages 7 and 8.)

The British press has said that Harry Potter is wanted for underage magic, but this memory clearly proves Harry's story, his self defense against Ministry assassins.

"I've been hiding since it happened. I don't think it's safe for me anywhere. As soon as this interview is done, I'll be leaving Brazil. The Ministry will not get a second chance to murder me."

The young wizard looked defiant as he made that statement. When asked what the Ministry should be doing, Harry was quick to respond.

"They should be clearing out their corrupt ranks; assembling a force to combat Voldemort; setting up simple magical detectors to track the use of Unforgivable Curses; securing their prisoners with something other than the Dementors they use as killers. Instead, they slander my good name in the press, send Dementors into Muggle neighborhoods, and risk the secrecy of our entire world.

British witches and wizards put these incompetent killers in power; they can fix the situation or else they deserve what they get.

Harry did not disclose the places he'd been since leaving England, but he did hint that he'd traveled extensively. "I might have to return to some of those places eventually, madam, so I'd rather keep the where and when's to myself for now."

He was not coy about offering advice to the people of Britain, however.

"The only advice I have is that Voldemort is still weak now, but every day he's left alone he gets stronger and gathers allies and resources. In a year or three, perhaps he'll be unstoppable. Everyone who dies in Britain from here on out is the responsibility of those who didn't do their jobs today: the Aurors, the Hit Wizards, the politicians, the Death Eaters, and Voldemort himself. The people who pretended nothing was happening. When they take your parents, don't come crying to me."

Mr. Potter couldn't control his emotions any longer and left the interview room. When this reporter went looking for him to ask several follow-up questions, he had disappeared from the hotel.

When contacted, the British Ministry of Magic had no immediate comment on Mr. Potter's allegations.

Mr. Potter contacted the International Magical Times two days ago to arrange this interview. Given the recent allegations against him in the British press, we were reluctant to accede to his interview request. However, the memories he provided – and which we've printed snippets from – have convinced us.

The British Ministry is out of control. Denying the truth; attempting to kill the messenger. These aren't the actions of a government; they're the tactics of totalitarian regimes. Mr. Potter is right: anyone who dies now dies as a result of negligence. Everyone in Britain now knows the truth.

Complete transcript of Harry Potter interview, page 3.

First Voldemort war timeline, page 11.

Profiles of Ministry officials, page 12.

Profiles of alleged Death Eaters, page 12.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry and Sirius planned for their second interview – on Sirius' false imprisonment – while they watched from afar as the British world tore itself into pieces. The Prophet slandered everything...until a rather disgruntled bunch of wizards stormed the place, destroyed the Prophet's printing presses, permanently disfigured Rita Skeeter, and held the Prophet's editor until he confessed what he'd been doing. The criminals managed to get the 'interrogation' broadcast on the Wizing Wireless.

A witch named Dolores Umbridge was found dead outside her apartment. Mr. Weaver was surprised, as she'd headed up the clandestine Suspensions Bureau of the DMLE...so her death meant Fudge was trying to cover up whatever had been done in his name. Perhaps she had used her powers at the Suspensions Bureau to put an assassination program into play? No one would ever know for sure. Umbridge was killed just to make sure of that.

Another pack of incensed witches and wizards stormed the Ministry and took a group of seven Aurors hostage. Those seven Aurors were forced to test every person inside the Ministry...by tearing off everyone's left sleeve. The mob got frothier every time they found a marked Death Eater among the Ministry's employees, nineteen in total. Several were hexed almost beyond recognition.

Fudge learned slowly. An aging Auror corps capped at eighty persons can't withstand an angry, half trained mob of hundreds carrying wands...can it? Of course, he didn't survive the lesson.

Several Aurors ended up killing a few of the mob, plus three unmarked Ministry officials, in the chaos of restoring order. The rest of the mob disbanded, but Fudge's days were numbered. He was voted out of office two days later; and was then drugged with veritas serum and forced to recount every crime he'd committed or authorized. The Wizengamot sentenced him to life in the new Ministry prison that had yet to be constructed. (Those old witches and wizards didn't like being in the spotlight, so they acted as quickly as they could to get back into the shadows.)

The marked Death Eaters were going on trial in a few days amid all the chaos in Britain. Things were looking up...save for Dumbledore.

From their warded home in Allston, Massachusetts, Harry and Sirius watched the reports of Dumbledore attempting to put his people into power again...so Harry and Sirius decided to up the timing of the next article and to change its focus. Dumbledore letting Sirius go to prison without trial; Dumbledore doing this and that....

Perhaps an angry mob would visit Hogwarts next before all the students arrived.

As for other matters, Harry and Sirius sent out five charmed letters to Harry's friends and one to Sirius' remaining school friend. Three letters remained white; two turned grey; one turned black.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Politicians Plot and Plan

A/N: There was some confusion about the letters from the last chapter. Harry sent out five; Sirius sent out one. The reviews were interesting in who people thought would be loyal or not. Also, the story explained the difference between gray and black (gray was speaking of the letter; black was showing it to someone else).

Some people assumed that Harry's friends would be the Ministry Five...except he hasn't met Luna or formed the DA in this story.

There is another bit of a cliffhanger at the end of this chapter...sorry, but I've envisioned that scene since I started this story. Had to write it just this way.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The American Secretary of Magic was a former teacher at the Stanford Academy of Magical Higher Learning; he was also the former Legislative Commissioner from California and a twelve year member of the Magical Congress. He had won election to his current post over seven other candidates on the third ballot. He could lecture and politic with the best of them.

He stood up from behind his desk and shook the hand of the young man who'd just come into his office. Harry Potter, British legend, British scapegoat.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Potter."

"I was pleased to be of assistance, Mr. Secretary. I thank you again for swearing the secrecy oath."

The Secretary nodded away the thanks. "Your story in the newspapers has caused a firestorm in the magical press. Fudge is in prison; the papers are going back through fifty years worth of British records looking for other screw ups. It will be nice to work with a counterpart who has more than two brain cells to rub together...."

Harry laughed at the Secretary's muggle-inspired joke.

"I've read that there's talk that the candidates for Minister of Magic will have a special sort of debate scheduled; one under veritaserum. It would be interesting to see if any of them survive the questioning," Harry said.

The Secretary smiled, but also shuddered at the prospect. He had done a number of things in his career he wouldn't want to have to own up to.

"I understand that Albus Dumbledore is attempting to wrest control of the Ministry. I understand he's promoting a Mr. Amos Diggory for Minister."

The young wizard looked mystified. "I can't see why Mr. Diggory would be a Dumbledore supporter. A competition the Headmaster spearheaded got his son, Cedric, killed."

"Perhaps this Mr. Diggory blames you...or others, rather than Mr. Dumbledore."

Harry nodded, a frown on his face.

"That wouldn't make the situation any worse. Fudge was already out for my blood."

The Secretary of Magic hummed for a moment before he smiled. "I suppose you might like to know why I asked Mr. Browne to set up this meeting?"

Harry nodded, but kept his expression neutral.

"The job of Secretary of Magic isn't at all what I thought it would be. Mostly putting out fires or coddling dictators around the world who can barely use a wand, but still retain power somehow. Every so often I get a chance to cleanly assist other people without endangering my own. It sounds a bit scheming, I suppose, but I think you'll be able to accomplish some grand things, given the proper platform."

"You'll have to be a bit less opaque," Harry said.

The Secretary smiled. "I'd like to help you establish a precedent, Harry. I'd like for the world to start recognizing that the only

governmental legitimacy comes from wizards and witches voting for their leader. Britain is about to try to find a new Minister. How? Their Wizengamot – a bunch of unelected, hereditary powers-that-be – is being lobbied and its members are horsetrading amongst themselves. The winner will have to present himself at the next ICW meeting...where you will speak against recognition of the government given its unresolved criminal activities, its undemocratic traditions, and the like. I've already begun a bit of lobbying on my end to make sure that receptive heads of government show up. It's supposedly a perfunctory meeting, so most heads of government won't attend...and proxies can't vote in a battle over governmental recognition. We'll stack the deck against Britain, set the precedent to deny government recognition to non-elected leaders, and then we can start pruning out those worthless unelected idiots...."

"Sounds too simple," Harry said.

"Hardly. I'll have my best specialists on international politics and the ICW brief you and...er, Mr. Black, if you wish. It won't be easy to accomplish, but it is possible."

Harry played along. "What happens when a government doesn't have ICW recognition?"

"The mutual assistance clauses in the ICW treaties fall away. Right now any government attacking Britain would be kicked out of the ICW and be subject to attack itself by all the other signatories. That's the reason your Voldemort never attacked outside his own country in the 1970s: civil wars aren't dealt with by the ICW compacts. Once he had a government, though, and enough power, he wouldn't care if all the other countries lined up against him. There are things he could use from the Department of Mysteries that, we understand, would make invading forces fall before him. Britain has, unfortunately, been collecting rare objects and stealing them from other nations longer than anyone else out there – it's where a good deal of their political clout comes from. Abject fear of exactly what might be in your Department of Mysteries."

"If the ICW does this, what's to stop Britain from using the items in their Department of Mysteries?"

Harry knew there was more to the story than he was being told.

"Ah, yes," the Secretary said. "Well, let's just speculate for a moment. Say we knew that the new Minister of Magic would be outside Britain for a period of time. Say for a meeting in Geneva? Then let's say that someone like Mr. Weaver – I believe you met him, although it's certainly not his real name – were to be in Britain at the time with a few of his colleagues. Let's say that around the time the ICW strips Britain of its authority, a magical explosion occurs in the Ministry building. Some, err, Unpeakable experiment gone awry. Then the threat of their power from artifacts is gone, just as their legitimacy is revoked. If their Voldemort problem got too bad, other countries could walk right into Britain and wipe him and his cadre of dark wizards out. I know that the French have wanted to deal with the issue for some time. People like the British Malfoys and Lestranges are an embarrassment to the French."

Harry was obviously working through the implications. This would force Britain to deal with its own problem – or enable other countries to do the dirty work without consequence. It seemed attractive, but there were a lot of places where it could fall apart.

"How would I speak in Geneva without giving away my safe haven here?"

"I could arrange for a colleague of mine in Angola, say, to bring you along with his delegation. It would be nothing at all for one of the Heads of Government to invite you to address the assembly before recognizing Britain's new representative."

"You seem awfully sure. How much of this have you already arranged? I've been stuck in enough plots in my life to realize that I walk much further with you I won't be able to turn back...."

The Secretary nodded. "The planning is pretty far along. I've been lobbying certain of my colleagues to attend this routine meeting in person. I've promised a special treat to a few of the ones who were harder to convince, but I haven't said your name."

"But, after Geneva, people may infer that I was helping you?"

"If the vote goes the way I expect, there will be more than fifty suspect nations for Britain to chew over. Plus, they'll be awfully busy if France invades."

"I'll need to discuss this with Sirius Black."

"Of course, like I said, I can make experts available or the actual text of the treaties or anything else you might need to sway your decision."

"Do you think it will work?"

"The part with the British? Ninety percent chance of success given how snotty the British have been in the past. Insisted that at least one of the seven Supreme Mugwumps is always from Britain; the present British officeholder is Dumbledore, of course, but I doubt he'll be able to attend if the little article I hear about is timed correctly..."

The Secretary suppressed a smile at seeing Harry look a bit uncomfortable for the first time. It wasn't hard to guess at what Harry and his godfather planned to do on their own.

"The part with using it as a precedent against other dictatorships? Better than even money. Some of my colleagues are as disgusted as I am that we recognize warlords and pirates as legitimate rulers."

Harry smiled faintly. "I don't suppose that getting rid of these types of rulers would make it easier to bring your magical forces back to America?"

The Secretary was surprised. This Potter had a mind to go along with his fame. Perhaps this might work out better than expected. "Why, Mr. Potter, I think you understand politics rather well. Our wizards support Muggle-declared wars for the most part; save for our situation in China, which was never a signatory to the ICW compacts. So, we stay and 'review' the situation, trying to keep the Muggles from being attacked by the enemy's magical forces.

The Secretary nodded a few times. "Yes, freedom from reprisal would allow us to get rid of that moron from Bosnia. The muggle hostilities would be over in a few weeks. Likewise with the 'Grand Warlord of Eritrea.' And deposing that idiot behind the 'Greater Magical Persia Movement' would allow us to leave Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia."

"I'll send my answer to Mr. Browne...within the next two days."

"That's the best I could hope for, Mr. Potter. Our resources will be open to you whenever you need them."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius Black hadn't laughed like this in years. The more Harry explained about what the Americans really wanted, the more Sirius laughed.

"It was your bright idea to get free, Harry, now you're even more entangled than before."

"At least the Secretary was direct about what he wanted. He's probably overestimating the chances of success, but it is interesting."

"You should write some letters to your friends, Harry."

"Any more evidence from the letters?"

Sirius shook his head and then lifted up a bundle of parchment. "Remus is still white, as are Neville and Dean. Ron's list of people he's told has increased a fair bit, from just Fred and George to now include Arthur, Molly, and some names I don't recognize. Seamus only told his mother. The black letter of Hermione's has been passed around a good deal. Her mother, my cousin Tonks, another Auror named Scrimgeour, McGonagall, Dumbledore.... A lot of interest you've attracted."

"It tells me Hermione can't exactly be trusted, but I don't know why. She ran to McGonagall with my Firebolt when she thought it might have been hexed. I wonder why she showed it to her mother, then to your cousin.... Why would your cousin know Hermione?"

"I told you about the 'Order,' didn't I?"

Harry nodded.

"Tonks is a Dumbledore fan, not hard core like Moody is, but still fond of him. She was probably out guarding Hermione and her parents."

"Guarding?"

"Because of her proximity to you," Sirius said. "She'll be a target of interest."

Harry snagged the letters and examined them. "It's sad that I was at school for so long and have so few friends to show for it, Hermione and my dorm mates" Harry said. "I don't think I know any Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws well even though we have the same classes together."

"It's always that way. I became friends with a few Ravenclaws after Hogwarts...rather attractive witches, if you catch my meaning," Sirius said.

"You're too old to snag a witch any longer," Harry retorted. "We'll have to stick you in the home for old bachelors."

"I'll take you down to the wizarding section of Boylston and I'll show you what I can do. I had it, I still have it, and I will always have it."

"You might have better luck running around as Padfoot in the park. Some women love stray animals...."

Harry ran when Sirius began to chase him. The letters were forgotten for a while. Taunts, and bets, and threats were exchanged...all in the name of good fun.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry walked back into the Department of Magic on Monday morning. He had a busy week. He'd accepted quite a bit of help from the Department. Sirius was setting up some other options...but for now, Harry hoped the Department did the things it said it would. He would have to test to make sure that each person had sworn the oath to protect Harry's secrets and not lie to him.

Today he was giving his first briefing. He'd decided to participate in the Secretary of Magic's plan regarding Britain's new Minister of Magic. He needed to brief the diplomats and...the other folks who might well get involved.

He entered the conference room and saw that it had been expanded. Mr. Weaver sat near the back. Mr. Peachtree was near the front. Most of the other seats were filled. Harry walked to the front of the room and stood behind a small lectern.

"I guess I'm supposed to tell you all about where I grew up. Why don't I keep my remarks short and then we can get into what all of you really want to know. First, before I talk, how many of you have ever been to Hogwarts?" Three people raised their hands. More than a hundred people did not. "Fair enough. I'll not presume you have much exposure to Britain, then."

The first image appeared on the screen. "This is Hogwarts. It will feature in many of the memories I'll be showing today...."

Harry got the notion that not very many of the people in the room were paying attention to what he was saying. They were here because they were told to be here. None of them expected to learn anything important or interesting. Harry got an evil glint in his eye.

"Keeping in mind your oath never to lie to me, raise your hand if you've ever stolen something from the Ministry." Forty hands rose into the air.

Harry felt certain that most of these people had sworn the oath. He'd have to keep checking until he was sure.

"That's a reminder of your oath. I'm here telling you things you swore to keep secret; this stuff is important. I'm not here for my health. Now, listen up. Also, do not think to use this information inappropriately. You won't like the consequences." That had the room silent. Sirius had been right: don't start with a joke, start with a threat.

Damn! Harry had to pay for dinner tonight...and Sirius had been talking about Legal Seafood. His godfather could eat like a horse.

Images flashed onto a screen to Harry's right. "This is Voldemort in his reincarnated form. He was born Tom Marvolo Riddle, son of a low-powered witch and a muggle man she bewitched. He abandoned her; she died after giving birth. Tom Riddle grew up in a rather coarse orphanage in London and learned early on he could do magic...without a wand. At Hogwarts, he pillaged the library for

books that discussed topics the school didn't teach. Somehow he discovered his heritage as an heir of one of the founders...which led him to the famed Chamber of Secrets. He used the basilisk living in there to terrorize students and kill one. He delved into black magic and created soul containers, or horcruxes, at a young age. With them in place, he cannot be truly killed. However, he can be restrained; his magic could be removed from him; his threat could be ended in a number of ways without having to kill him."

The images on the screen changed. The Americans had vast dossiers on everyone Harry was to speak on today, but even with all that, Harry still had more knowledge at his disposal. "This is Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, head of the legislative and judicial branch of Britain, one of the seven appointed leaders of the ICW. He is famed for stopping Gellert Grindelwald, the wizarding force behind the muggle Second World War. He also leads an intelligence gathering force called the Order of the Phoenix that your Intelligence apparatus believe is actually only less dangerous a terrorist force than the Death Eaters. Both forces select different targets, of course, but have some methods in common. Mr. Dumbledore here was responsible for spreading knowledge of a prophecy concerning me to Voldemort in 1980, the prophesy that led him to attack my parents and me. He was also responsible for placing me with my mother's muggle relatives. He seems elderly and harmless, but he is an accomplished, remorseless wizard. Be careful."

The image changed to a smug, blonde man. "This is Lucius Malfoy, suspected lead Death Eater. Among the wealthiest of the pureblood contingent in Britain, he purchased his way free of prison when Voldemort fell in 1981. He was an advisor to Ministers Bagnold and Fudge. I expect that he will smarm his way close to whoever the Wizengamot selects next. We can use him to help discredit the next Minister. I will be showing some rather interesting memories of all these people during this briefing...."

Harry came to his final slide thirty minutes later. "This is Rufus Scrimgeour. I've never met the man, but as of this morning he has been named as the new Minister of Magic. My source was quite agitated about the decision, given the man's lackluster skills as an auror but his desire for political advancement. I do know that Dumbledore was disappointed with the decision...and will likely work to undermine Scrimgeour going forward."

A few hands rose up in the audience. "Hold your questions for now. I'd like to show you why I bothered with these biographies. We'll take about an hour to review some of my memories. I suspect many of your questions will be answered by them."

Harry queued up selections going in reverse chronological order. Dementors attacking him and Dudley; Voldemort's return and Fudge's incredulity; and all the way back to the bits and pieces that Sirius had managed to resurrect of Harry's earliest memories pre-age one, memories of James and Lily Potter.

The number of hands in the air was staggering. Instead of answering questions, his memories had prompted them.

"Mr. Potter, have you determined who the unnamed Death Eaters were at the graveyard?"

"Yes, a few of them. But the problem is the number of unmarked supporters he has. Those we know little about. Some provide intelligence; others provide resources or simple bags of galleons. Some in the Wizengamot provide votes."

Another person, obviously a diplomat, stood up. "Excuse me, but can you explain why none of these stories made it into the press? The basilisk business at least."

"Dumbledore hushed it up. He still temporarily lost his position as headmaster in my second year at school, but the newspapers never picked it up. The Minister isn't the only one who can influence reporting."

The questions rained down for quite some time before Mr. Peachtree redirected the conversation around to the mission in Geneva.

"My speech is written," Harry said. "It will also follow on the heels of a scathing article about Dumbledore. I'll be meeting with an international political reporter from Tempus in a foreign country. We're layering this as best we can to make sure our effort in Geneva is successful."

"What's your backup plan," one audience member asked.

"Which one? I have several plans to deal with a number of contingencies. But I won't be sharing them here and now."

"What will you do if it fails?" asked another person, this one sitting next to a scowling Mr. Peachtree.

"I take my licks in the press and move on. Battles like this can be fought hundreds of ways. I'm only getting started."

Harry was about to leave the stage when he realized he was annoyed by some of the last questions asked. He also wanted to determine, once and for all, if everyone had sworn the oath of secrecy.

"Keeping in mind your oath about me, raise your hand if you've ever badmouthed your boss behind his or her back."

The hands of everyone in the room went up. Harry almost skipped out of the room. A little prank was still a worthwhile thing.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The reporter had covered a lot of cagey individuals before...whistleblowers afraid for their lives; political opposition leaders who'd faced assassination attempts; battered wives of famous wizards who'd gone into hiding to protect their children. None had sent as elaborate of procedures as this Harry Potter.

Miranda Bienveniste had had to take a portkey from her home base of Paris to a dingy little store in the middle of a tiny town in Spain. Another note and a portkey had her journeying to Romania. From there to the Ukraine. Finally, to Chennai and a dingy hotel room.

She didn't have to wait long before the hotel room door opened and a young man stepped inside.

"Ms. Bienveniste?"

"Yes?"

"Come with me. I've arranged a slightly more comfortable place for us to speak."

The reporter followed the dark haired boy for ten minutes until they arrived at an apartment building. He bounded up the steps with unlimited energy. She was barely in her thirties, but was huffing by the time they reached the seventh floor.

The boy threw open a door to an apartment and walked inside. It was a well decorated place.

Harry, she presumed, was the one to hand her a glass of water. She drunk eagerly and then took the seat in the office-like room she found herself inside.

"Harry Potter?"

"Sorry for the abruptness. I am trying to stay safe at the present moment."

"I understand. You wrote that you had more to tell about your story?"

"Well, it's my story, but this part is rather more about my former Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. While I've been globetrotting, I've looked back on things that should have made me suspicious. Then they didn't; now they do."

"Dumbledore? Was he involved in the plot to kill you?"

"No," Harry said. "He was the one who kidnapped me when I was an infant."

The reporter goggled at the accusation. It was beyond...harsh. She wondered if the boy had the evidence to back it up.

Harry dutifully produced a pensieve and showed her several fragments: of Hagrid talking about that night and how Dumbledore had ordered Harry to be sent to Little Whinging; how Hagrid had prevented Sirius Black from taking Harry that night; a fragment showing Sirius Black and some dumpy wizard called Peter Pettigrew arguing about who betrayed the Potters.

The reporter had questions after seeing all that. Most of them were variations of 'why?'

"Let me start with facts, then we can move into speculation, right? Dumbledore was the Head of the Wizengamot when Sirius Black, my godfather, was sent to Azkaban without trial. On his own authority, he could have pulled Sirius out and given him a trial. He didn't. He let Barty Crouch do whatever he wanted. Why?

"Dumbledore was, in fact, the person who cast the Fidelius Charm for my parents...obviously a rather imperfect piece of magic. He would have known who the Secret Keeper was...and would have been involved in changing it from Sirius to Peter Pettigrew. Dumbledore was, then, the perfect piece of evidence that Sirius was innocent. So, again, why hide that knowledge?"

The reporter had a pensieve at the office to enable her to get an exact transcript...but she was scribbling as fast as she could. She wrote down as much as she could so she could ask cogent questions. She didn't know how long she'd have to speak with this interesting young man...so she needed to get as much of the story as she could.

"Mr. Dumbledore is a high Ministry official. Why would he do these things?"

"Let me tell you a parallel story. After Dumbledore tucked me away at my muggle aunt's home, another high Ministry official went to Azkaban with his dying wife. Mrs. Crouch begged her husband to free their son, Barty Jr., a convicted Death Eater. So, that's what he did. A bit of Polyjuice Potion; switcheroo. The wife died at Azkaban looking like her son; the son was kept at home by his high Ministry official of a father under the Imperius Curse. This official headed up the DMLE during the war. He threw people into Azkaban for using the same curse he later used to restrain his son. I can share the memory of when I heard this story as well...."

Miranda couldn't believe the wealth of this interview so far. "Yes, please." She'd get a quartet of stories out of it easily.

The back and forth of stories and memories continued well into the night. Everything Dumbledore did that Harry saw; everything Harry could allude to that he'd read in the American's dossier on him. Everything, with proof, with interpretation, with damning context.

Dumbledore might be able to weather out the storms that Rita Skeeter and others conjured in Britain...it was necessary to have minor nuisance like Skeeter to keep others from digging into the proper places. However, for Dumbledore, his major support base was outside Britain and Skeeter's rants never made it off the island. The Tempus story would be international. Perhaps the story would be enough to strip Dumbledore of his ICW role; perhaps it would take even more.

Perhaps it would take Dumbledore himself revealing his cards in such a way no one could doubt what he really was....

Harry ended the interview with the exhausted journalist and gave her a portkey that would start her journey back to Paris. Without another word, he took a portkey and disappeared. When Miranda traced the signature, it led to Egypt. She followed him. The next portkey lead to Angola. There was no further portkey. Potter was hiding out in southern Africa.

A dangerous place for Muggles, but better than entrapped or dead. She'd keep the Angolan angle to herself for now.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius waited for Remus to appear at Gringotts Boston. Harry and Sirius had both sent Remus two letters and they'd decided to trust the man...a bit.

Harry was trying to figure out a way to see Seamus, Dean, Ron, Hermione, and Neville before they all returned to school. Harry wanted to look Seamus, Ron, and Hermione in the eye and truly determine if they were for Dumbledore's side – or if they were just teenagers who did foolish things which had unintended consequences.

It was hard being so suspicious all the time.

Harry stood under his invisibility cloak outside Gringotts Boston to see what was going to happen; Sirius stood inside it, waiting, hoping for his friend to appear.

A few minutes later, Remus' journey of a dozen portkeys (through Denmark, Estonia, Turkey, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates,

Laos, Japan, Ecuador, Mexico, the American Immigration Center in Miami, an abandoned gas station in Kansas, and finally Boston) ended. Harry watched him look around for Sirius, get a massive smile on his face, and then give Sirius a tentative hug. The pair began babbling to each other at a thousand words a minute.

Harry watched them for half an hour. One or both had obviously erected silencing wards, as several people on Lower Boylston stared at the talking people who obviously made no sound. Where these gawkers witches and wizards or not? Hadn't they seen silencing spells before?

Eventually Sirius decided Remus passed the test. He held out another portkey and both of them took it...to a safehouse other than the one in Allston. The wards there would do a comprehensive scan of Remus to see if he'd been magically tracked or otherwise put under surveillance. Sirius had held out a lot of hope, but Harry was distrustful of pretty much everything right now.

Harry walked into a dark alley off Lower Boylston, removed his invisibility cloak, and then walked over to Gringotts. He did need to finish up his business with the goblins.

He walked inside and noticed that it seemed very familiar, almost identical to the Gringotts in London.

"I need to confirm the completion of vault transfers," Harry said. The goblin didn't bother to look up; it merely pointed across the way to a different goblin.

Thus Harry started playing goblin pinball. By the time he was routed to a seventh goblin, his patience was gone. He stood in the middle of an empty bank and shouted, "Tell me who handles the receiving of transferred vaults. NOW."

One snarling goblin lifted his head from a pile of gold encrusted rubies he was examining with a magnifying glass. "I am Slaprot, wizard."

Harry walked over to the indicated wizard. He thought he heard mocking laughter from the other goblins in the room.

Harry pushed a slip of paper across the desk of the unsmiling goblin. "These are the vaults transferred from Gringotts London. Please tell me their status."

Slaprot examined the list and then pulled out and opened a massive ledger. "All three were received. However, Gringotts London advised us that their Ministry attempted to lock those vaults down...."

"Upon whose order?"

"The Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot." Dumbledore.

"They're here? Unimpeded?"

"The American Department of Magic has not asked for your vaults to be sealed. Gringotts Boston cares not a knut for what the English want."

"Issue me with my new vault numbers and keys."

Slaprot slipped off his tall stool and seemed to disappear. It was only when the goblin came back that Harry noticed the small hint of a door back where the goblin was.

Suddenly a small ring of keys dropped down on Harry's head. "There, wizard."

"I will remember your...service, Slaprot."

Harry tucked the ring of keys into his robes before he walked out of the bank. He wondered if America had a better alternative for banking than the goblins. He'd have to ask someone at the Department the next time he went there.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry woke up slightly disoriented. A portkey last night to Geneva; a night in a hotel bed. Sirius was back at their secondary safe house in America in case anything went wrong here.

He was supposed to meet his sponsors from Angola downstairs. The Angolans, unlike other magical governments, did not maintain an expensive formal residence in Geneva, so they were three floors

above Harry at the present moment. Better to pay for twelve or fifteen nights of hotel stays than a year's worth of a consular mansion, plus staff, plus security.

Harry stepped into his dress clothing, a suit that he would wear underneath Angolan ceremonial robes. It would enrage the British...and Dumbledore, if the man showed. The Tempus article had hit the world yesterday. The old warlock was probably fairly busy...Dumbledore also knew if he showed up he'd have to answer some uncomfortable questions from the ICW General Assembly, including forty-some heads of government.

Harry walked to the elevator and then headed into breakfast in the beautiful main dining room. He saw the small group of Angolan wizards who represented their government.

Harry smiled and waved at them. He had applied a translation charm while he was in America last night. Evidently, from his ability to understand his breakfast companions, it was still working.

"Are you ready?" the Grand Wizard of Angola asked. The man was rather old, past one hundred, and had done amazing things with the study of ancient African runes. He was also one of only four elected wizarding rulers in Africa. Their muggles were in a bad way, but their wizarding traditions hadn't degenerated into barbarism...not with such a strong leader in place.

"I think I'm ready for anything, even for the British candidate to be a purple dancing chicken."

"I do not think that the Auror-politician they selected will favor such a costume."

"Perhaps," Harry said. "It is possible he will wear clothing that truly reveals his personality." It earned Harry a small laugh, but it did little to calm him.

He ate a small breakfast as his nerves didn't allow him anything bigger. He hated public speaking...and now he was on the world stage. It felt worse than the moments before his first, terrifying Quidditch match.

The Grand Wizard stood up and the rest of his advisors followed. Harry was just a second late. He hung to the back of the procession as they left the hotel and apparated to the Palais of Nations – the nominal European headquarters of the United Nations – which housed the secret ICW tower. The ICW headquarters was invisible to all muggles and rose nine circular stories from the top of the central section of the Palais. One had to take a portkey from the wizarding entrance of the grounds to get to the entrance in the sky. The anti-apparition wards there were some of the strongest in Europe. The building was unique in that it also had broom-dampening charms and dampened all other forms of magic within ten meters.

It took a moment to get to the main level and just a few seconds to walk through the opened door that was guarded by three wizards.

Harry was the last of his party inside the massive, magical space. He restrained a gasp, but just barely. The General Assembly Hall was perhaps the most beautiful thing Harry had ever seen. It was probably more magical than even the ceiling of the Great Hall of Hogwarts, too.

Aside from four ornate doorways that hung in the air of their own volition, the entire space looked like a beautiful outdoors scene, lush grasses everywhere underfoot, a perpetually warm sun in the sky. There were more than a hundred elegant round tables scattered around the open plain and a raised dais in the center of everything. Harry did not feel like he was in Geneva – or in a building at all. It felt real; the smell of the flowers; the grass he stepped upon; the sun on his face; a light lick of wind through his hair.

He could hear the burbling of a small stream over to his right. He saw foothills rise up thousand of feet in the distance. The room looked infinite.

The Grand Wizard smiled. "The thought was that a peaceful setting such as this would help remind us all why we come. Peace; beauty; safety; prosperity. Noble goals which the most pigheaded among us continually overwhelm."

"I just want to try taking a nap in the grass. It looks so real," Harry said.

"It is real, to an extent. If you wish, we could return to the visitor's center on the main floor after we finish here. I do not doubt they sell a book on the making of this room. When we are not in session, it is quite the popular wizarding tourist attraction. I believe some families even rent it out for weddings and the like."

"It is perfect."

The old wizard's voice dipped into a whisper. "I once, during my first year as Grand Wizard, took a dare and went swimming in the river over there. It is quite real; my robes were soaked. I have seen some individuals fish out beautiful dinners from those waters, too."

Harry wondered if the people who had created this space had constructed something like the Hogwarts Room of Requirement. Harry would look for a book on this room; a technical book, not just a picture guide. It would be something to sleep in a room like this.

Harry walked to the table where the Angolan mission had set up. As Harry sat down, a glass of water appeared before him along with a small plate of chocolates.

"It knows...somehow...just what you need at the moment. You're currently overwhelmed by the beauty of this room, but your nerves will return momentarily. I think the General Assembly has offered you chocolate to calm you."

Harry smiled, lifted his glass of water in salute to the beautiful semi-sentient room, and drank. Then he tasted a chocolate. It was better than anything he had ever tried: dark, slightly bitter, rather unsweet, but...perfect. It made his tongue and mouth warm. He could smell hints of mint and orange and other flavors he didn't recognize.

It was chocolate for an adult.

The room began to fill quickly. Harry slowly tasted the other offerings on the plate, each different from the last.

He was rather calm when he noticed the British finally arrive. This Scrimgeour person looked like a bedraggled lion and walked with a limp.

Dumbledore had not turned up. The six Supreme Mugwumps sat at their table near the dais looking rather upset. They had apparently relished the opportunity to lay into Dumbledore for what the press was now reporting. He had power outside Britain; but it also seemed he had enemies there, as well.

The oldest of the Mugwumps stood and beckoned toward to the Grand Wizard of Angola to take the dais. Harry began to see why he was placed with the Angolans by the American Secretary of Magic (who Harry had made a point of not looking at). Apparently the Grand Wizard of Angola held some sort of privilege in this assembly.

The old wizard quickly made his way to the lectern and began to speak, "My fellows in magic, it is my privilege as the current vice chairman of the General Assembly to call us all into order. We have much work to do in this quarterly meeting and never enough time. I am going to delay the first agenda item, however, to request a person of importance to address us." The Grand Wizard held out his hand toward Harry.

Harry moved swiftly through the tables to the dais. He looked like some sort of feline on the hunt.

He stepped to the lectern, gave a bow from the neck toward the Grand Wizard, and began to speak without notes. Sirius had had Harry run through this speech twenty times...he could do it from memory without a doubt.

"My name is Harry Potter." That was enough to get gasps out of the British table. "I have asked to address you because of problems in my home nation, Britain. Even as I've been in hiding, the reports of the government falling because of corruption and criminal acts – some of them against me – have reached my ears. Good! I'm glad my would-be assassins are in prison.

"But, I have not yet heard a single word about the most important issue facing my home country: assembling a force to deal with Voldemort. The new Minister, here to receive the ICW's traditionally nominal blessing, has said he would seek to repatriate me to Britain so that we could work together on the Voldemort problem. I am a child; not a soldier, not a government agent, not someone willing to give up my rights. Britain must solve its problem with its Aurors or its magical devices or its alliances with other nations – or else the world

must step in to take care of the problem for a nation unwilling to stop a terrorist threat.

"Because I know the dysfunction of British politicians, I have asked the Grand Wizard of Angola to sponsor a motion to be voted upon by all the Heads of Government in this room. Reject the British Minister's credentials; strip Britain at least temporarily of its sovereign immunity granted by the ICW compacts. Let me succinctly state the case: 1) the Fudge corruption is not entirely resolved and it is possible the new Minister or the Wizengamot that selected him are equally implicated, as several newspapers are continuing to report, 2) the new Minister has been in office for weeks and has done nothing to increase the size of his fighting force nor announced plans to do so nor contracted with mercenaries outside Britain nor even investigated the powerful devices of the Department of Mysteries that would give him an advantage in war, 3) all of his announced plans involve making people feel safer rather than actually making them safer, 4) the British have never endorsed the stated ICW mission of permitting witches and wizards regional control over their own affairs, through voting, elections, and political empowerment, and 5) this new Minister was not selected in any plebiscite nor have the witches and wizards of Britain ever selected him for high office, he has been a bureaucrat for his entire adult life and is not acting in their best interests at this point in time.

"These last two points are perhaps the most important: wizarding Britain is tremendously undemocratic, with a hereditary body selecting Ministers without any glance toward the public opinion. Instead of giving people with different views the ability to participate legitimately in government, the structure of the country forces them into renegade roles or into bribery. Voldemort might have become a politician and worked his way up the chain of command, had such a possibility existed then, instead he became a terrorist with plans to overthrow the government and install himself at its head. Responsible governance would not permit gross bribery and corruption to flourish; no one with power watched over these people and disciplined them for their venality. Witches and wizards there are disconnected from their government and have no control over its tyranny, save for angered, disgusted mobs. That is not democracy.

"Britain, as it exists today, will drag everyone into war. And then it will do it again in fifty years. And again. Powerful witches and wizards will demand to make their views heard; if we do not have

democracy, we will have terrocracy and tyranny. This would-be British Minister plans to do nothing to change the system that has rewarded him. His plans, as tiny and insignificant as they are, will fail. For he does not speak of a changed country; of witches and wizards mobilized, all preparing to become war witches and wizards; he does not even allude to the possibility of the average citizen voting. He plans to lose, while promising to win. He lies poorly; even one as young as I can see this. It does not have to happen this way. Your vote, today, can ensure the beginning of peace in Britain."

Harry turned his head to look at the British. Scrimgeour looked to be in a purple rage. All he was missing was a chicken costume. In a few seconds, the power of the room obliged. The Minister leaped out of his chair, blotchy red and purple in anger, dressed in a chicken costume. He did look like he was dancing.

Harry smiled and left the dais. He looked around for a moment. The real leaders in the room recognized why the Americans had told them to attend. They could vote to strip Britain of its protective coating; they could wage war and take care of the cancer soon to leave Britain and head elsewhere in the world.

Harry began to walk as he saw interested faces pondering their options. But Harry did not make it back to his seat.

A blast of energy blew open one of the doors, the northern door, the one used only by the Supreme Mugwumps to travel from the tallest level of the tower to the General Assembly Hall. Harry turned to observe what was happening.

Albus Dumbledore, resplendent in gold robes, stormed inside the room. His face was etched with anger and fury. He pulled out his wand and leveled it at Harry from a few hundred feet away.

"Stupefy," the old warlock shouted. Harry just smiled.

Old Politicians Don't Get Voted Back Into Office

A/N: Oops, I goofed in the last chapter. Harry wouldn't know to compare the General Assembly Hall to the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts. (He hadn't been in it yet.) Oh well...

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Weaver had on quite a sophisticated muggle disguise when he entered the British Ministry of Magic. He looked like a cross between a brown haired chimp from the wig he wore and a drama student from the various bits of prosthesis on his face. (No one living had a nose as large as the one he now featured.) He was a seriously ugly person: one rather unlikely to be stopped by anyone else.

His nine colleagues were already inside; two were here nominally to pay fines to the DMLE; three were on an official tour; the others were lining up to witness the trial of one Mundungus Fletcher, thief.

Weaver was present to kick off the whole operation. The trick was making sure that everything in the Department of Mysteries was thoroughly destroyed. It wouldn't do just to damage things so that they could eventually be repaired. The items had to be dust; research notes had to be cinders; the people who worked on them...unfortunately...also had to die. He wouldn't want anyone reverse engineering some of these items.

Weaver got off the elevator at the Department of Mysteries level and started to walk toward the stairway down to the courtrooms, but he hid himself in a nook and surveyed the area. Aside from those moving to the courtrooms, nothing happened here.

Weaver waited an hour. Then his team members inside the Ministry began to trickle back to him. Three of them nodded at Weaver then proceeded directly to the entrance to the Department of Mysteries.

It took them five seconds to remove the stone work keeping the door in place. Another minute and six complex wards later, and the ten were inside. They didn't plan to steal any of its secrets. It was enough to level the playing field. What America had for defenses, Americans had designed and created. They didn't use any unknown or truly ancient artifacts like the British did.

Weaver waved at his team and pointed to the doors. They needed to penetrate each of the doors and use the special potions prepared for this mission. The team of ten began casting spell after spell inside the whirling room. The doors began to shatter, then eventually the spinning room stopped moving. A few more spells shattered the remaining doors. The team went in pairs through the doors. The entire Department was a huge Labyrinth, but Weaver and his people knew where the major collections were kept. Every twenty feet Weaver dropped a canister of the special explosive potion. Five minutes passed before he and his partner made it to the secure vault. He dropped three canisters there on the floor and painted a smelly goop onto the steel vault door.

Almost immediately the steel began to melt inward.

"Let's go," Weaver said.

Weaver and his partner were the third and fourth people to return. He gave everyone another two minutes. Two of his team were still missing. He checked his special mission watch. They were both down...all the way down. Someone or something had killed them.

"What was down that corridor?" Weaver pointed to his right.

"That's where the Omega Stone was kept."

"Damn." There wasn't time to mourn the loss of teammates, but he couldn't leave until the job was done, either.

"What do we have for munitions?"

Two teams had laid out everything they carried in. All that remained otherwise were fifteen canisters and one 'special item.' Weaver pointed to several large fragments of shattered door. "Transfigure those into large birds. Animate them to fly. We'll strap on the canisters and get them to where they need to be. God damned Omega Stone."

The team worked silently, with two stationed to keep an eye on anyone attempting to sneak up on them. For such a valuable repository, it was poorly protected. Buried underneath the Ministry, they thought it safe wrapped in some wards that were easy to break.

Its workers, the Unspeakables, had fled into safe rooms scattered throughout the floor rather than fight.

No Aurors called to fight, but maybe they waited in the hallway to attack. Too bad Weaver and his remaining team weren't going out that way.

The transfigured birds flew off with their deadly cargo. Even if there was something fighting in that corridor, it would be able to get all of those semi-sentient birds. They were moving too quickly. Any direct hits would also trigger the canisters.

Weaver nodded at each of the surviving teams. The birds would trigger the detonations in that deadly corridor. Each of the other teams would have to start the detonations...in five, four, three, two, one.

The building shook and the sounds of distant explosions began to come nearer. "Soon," Weaver said. "It'll happen soon."

Just then, all eight felt the anti-apparition wards drain away into the earth. It made sense for the Ministry to hide the rune stones for their wards down here...and now they were gone.

"Portkeys now."

The eight portkeyed away a few seconds before the entire floor went up in a massive sustained fireball. It didn't last for a second and dissipate. The canisters contained potions that would allow the fires to burn very hot for thirty minutes.

Within the inferno of the Department of Mysteries, other horrifying sounds began to play out. Thousands upon thousands of prophecy orbs cracked and exploded from the heat. A dozen cursed objects believed to be horcruxes began to wail. The weapons of power slowly, resistently began to crack and explode. Hundreds of years worth of notebooks and research guides stored in special archival niches began to burn and the wards protecting them groaned and broke.

Finally, even the Omega Stone, the famed boulder from the "Sword in the Stone" episode of British history, cracked and its sentience died away. It at one time helped anoint King Arthur; at various times

it had been used to repel vast armies of magic users from conquering Britain; at an even earlier time, it had been used to destroy a group of Romans who'd dared to try conquering Britain. Within the past century it had kept the Muggle Germans from directly invading Britain in the Second World War (even if it had been ineffective against air raids and falling bombs). Now...it was gone.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry heard the word Dumbledore said. "Stupefy." The enraged man had just lost his calm, grandfatherly exterior. He had just ruined Britain in front of the entire ICW. It was like a gift from Merlin.

Harry leapt to the side to avoid the Stunning Spell. But nothing came out of Dumbledore's wand. Instead, Dumbledore shrieked when his wand crumbled in his hand.

The magic of the room had attacked Harry's attacker. Presumably it would attack anyone drawing a wand and firing off a spell. It was a room of peace, after all.

"My wand...."

Of all the things that could have happened because of an enraged Dumbledore, Harry hadn't expected this. Dumbledore disarmed.

Suddenly he was bound in ropes and flopped over. The oldest of the Supreme Mugwumps stood up from his table and scowled at the bound warlock. "This is a place of peace and decision. Harry Potter was a guest and an invited speaker. Even had he been a serial killer, you would not be permitted to attack him here. As it is, he is a victim: of the British generally and of you specifically. What ever did you intend to accomplish? Or did you mean to take Harry and perform a mass obliviation on us? You are the only one in this room powerful enough to accomplish such magic...but you are obviously addled. Everyone knows not to cast magic in here, but it has been forty years or so since someone was stupid enough to try."

By the color of Dumbledore's face, the accusation of kidnapping and mass obliviation rang true.

A moment later, several guards ran into the room through the east door and saw a Supreme Mugwump bundled up on the ground.

"Sir?" One of the guards looked to the eldest of the Mugwumps for advice.

"Take Mr. Dumbledore to a holding cell. We will talk with him later."

The oldest Mugwump then turned back to Harry. "My apologies. The man is obviously insane." Then he turned to the Grand Wizard of Angola. "You have the floor again, sir."

The aged African wizard surveyed the audience. "Mr. Potter has provided an impassioned speech. I make the motion he requested. I move that the ICW not recognize the new Minister of Magic for Britain. Is there a second? I remind you that, in this matter, only the heads of government may vote."

Scrimgeour, still in his purple chicken costume, went pale at that information. He quickly surveyed the room and counted up who was here. Fudge had alienated more than half of them; the others had longer standing grudges against Britain. This had been planned and executed beautifully...his country would no longer be sovereign in the eyes of the world within minutes.

"I protest," the British Minister said.

"You are not recognized, sir. Please sit down," the Grand Wizard of Angola said.

"I must be heard."

The French Directeur rose at that point. "I second the proposal."

Scrimgeour flopped back into his seat. If there was any head of government he was likely to consider an ally, it would have been the French Directeur. But Dumbledore's stunt had just ruined everything.

"Heads of government, please stand to vote for the proposal."

Forty five people stood up.

"Heads of government, please stand to vote against the proposal."

Scrimgeour, who got glared at for daring to stand when he wasn't recognized yet as a head of government, and three others stood.

"Britain's representative is not accredited. Britain is eligible to apply for accreditation at a later date, but its sovereign protections under ICW compacts are removed until then. I would caution the British to send only an elected representative back to this body in the future."

The Grand Wizard of Angola stared at Scrimgeour with unimpassioned eyes. The man rose, his clothing returned to a business suit and robes, and he and his team walked from the room. He had no business there.

"I propose we take a ten minute break at this time. I suspect some of us will need to make reports back home about this occurrence."

The Grand Wizard walked back to his table.

Harry stood near to where he was 'attacked' by Dumbledore. Overconfidence and pure arrogance killed the man's political career. He had really thought to kidnap Harry and memory charm everyone here? Stupid...unless he had pulled such a stunt before. Harry would have to see what the Americans knew about that.

Dumbledore's fall didn't really please Harry. It angered him that the old man had been allowed to do whatever he wanted for so long. Harry did take a small amount of pleasure in Britain being kicked out of the ICW. It followed that Dumbledore was automatically no longer a Supreme Mugwump. He would no longer be called upon to sit in justice on nation versus nation lawsuits; a new nation's chief judicial officer would be sworn into the seventh Supreme Mugwump's seat.

Harry eventually looked around and noticed the room was mostly empty. People really did have to notify their home governments about these happenings.

The Grand Wizard of Angola, however, was still at his table. Harry walked to him and gave a small bow. "Thank you, sir, for the opportunity."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter, for making this odd occurrence possible. I've never liked Albus nor his rigid public moral code that he all too

frequently broke in private. Makes me think of those muggle ministers who demand monogamy from their flocks only to go out whoring every night themselves."

The Grand Wizard surveyed the room for a moment. "It will be a busy few weeks in Britain, I'd speculate. Not a good week to be in a Death Eater home, I'd think."

Harry nodded. "I hope the trials that will occur will be swift and just."

The Grand Wizard just nodded. Harry began to walk away. He didn't like the idea of leaving this wondrous room, but he did have other things to do today.

He walked out the door he'd come in from. Then he looked around the drab government-style antechamber he was in. Too bad they hadn't used magic to dress it up.

Harry walked up to a guard. "Excuse me, but where is the visitor center?"

The guard spoke in a harsh Russian-inflected English. "Just down the hall and to your right, sir."

Harry found it a minute later. It was a fairly small nook, but he could see a couple of books that might be what he was looking for.

There was a pensieve memory for sale; several picture books; and one rather neglected paperback book entitled, "The Pinnacle of Magical Architecture Series: ICW General Assembly Hall."

Harry flipped through it and his first instinct was for his eyes to glaze over. His second instinct – to master this material – hit him harder. He flipped back and scanned the chapters of the book: Near-Infinite Space Enlargement Charm, Anti-Magic Warding, Appearance Setting Spells, Growing Real Plants inside a Magical Construct, Magical Effects (Smells, Heat, Wind, and Water), Creating the Semi-Sentience Cornerstone, Wish Fulfillment Enchantments, Flexible Security Wards, Unbreakable Permanence Charm, For Further Reading.

Harry flipped to the last section of the book – its suggested reading list – and scanned through the titles. He wanted to know how such a

room was possible. It seemed like he'd need to find a good bookstore or two on Lower Boylston in Boston.

He walked over and paid for his new acquisition. He intended to head back to the gardens with the ICW portkey, but he bumped into someone – the French Directeur – at the door from the visitor center.

"My apologies," Harry said.

"It was my fault," the French Head of Government stated in flawless English. "In fact, I planned for it."

"Really? I understand from a mutual friend that you've long wished for the British situation to be remedied."

The old man nodded. "I shouldn't say, but I believe that even now the situation with Voldemort is on the mend. We have already 'secured' Azkaban Prison. By the end of tomorrow, I think we'll have this Dark Lord bound and his magic drained. Perhaps we'll transfigure him into a purple chicken and bury him under tons of concrete somewhere...." The Directeur seemed to enjoy the idea.

"That soon?"

"Competent armies can execute precision strikes if they are properly equipped and trained and have had a chance to plan. We've had plenty of notice...and much incentive."

Harry heard the belittling of the British and the man's anger about having to act as a 'competent army' for a nation that couldn't or wouldn't.

"Thank you for what you're doing."

"I'm keeping my people safe, of course, Mr. Potter. If Britain ever fell, France would be next. Voldemort with the power of a Ministry behind him...we would have been fighting a losing battle. But, with surprise on our side and no British Ministry to interfere with its arcane weapons, we can do the job."

Harry nodded again at the French Head of Government. Then he walked out into the hallway and shortly thereafter left the ICW and

Geneva altogether. His political salvo in this war might be the last shot he needed to fire.

He hadn't expected that the Americans had arranged their friends and allies so effectively.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The Great Voldemort Threat was gone within days as the French Directeur promised. He had only been as effective as he was in the first war because of virtual sabotage by his supporters in the Ministry and gross incompetence by all those who fought him.

Foreigners had even offered to come and help with the Voldemort problem, but the Ministry had turned them all down – and then revoked their passport entry rights into Britain.

The British hubris was dealt a massive blow. Eighty-nine marked Death Eaters and unmarked supporters were in French prisons awaiting an international tribunal. The British were de-recognized as a legitimate government. Their massive stockpile of offensive and defensive artifacts was destroyed. No longer could the pureblood contingent bully the Ministry (as the worst bigots were all in prison); no longer could the Ministry bully its sovereign neighbors. Britain had to establish alliances, true partnerships, if it wanted to exercise any power at all in the world.

Dumbledore, for his actions at the ICW meeting, was sent to a cell in the ICW prison Nurmengard. His five year sentence – solely for drawing a weapon during an ICW-sanctioned meeting – would be spent in close proximity to Gellert Grindelwald, his one-time stepping stone to fame. A lovely irony that the six remaining Supreme Mugwumps couldn't help but chuckle over in private.

No one believed his protestations of innocence; that he had been asleep in his office at Hogwarts.

(No one even considered that a few well-trained American house elves had infiltrated Hogwarts, plucked a hair from the Headmaster's head, administered him a triple dose of Dreamless Sleep, and then carried him and his wand off once he fell asleep in his office, only for his person to be later swapped out for the American agent under Polyjuice Potion who'd 'attacked' Harry Potter. Would the Great and

Almighty Albus Dumbledore have been so brazen – or said so little to justify his actions after the fact? A very few people knew of the operation to permanently discredit Dumbledore, including Weaver and the American Secretary of Magic. Harry never did learn this particular truth.)

Weaver, however, liked the fact that Dumbledore, an innocent man, was sent away to prison. It served him right for the crimes he'd committed against others, including Sirius Black, another innocent man. Perhaps Albus would learn some humility....

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The reporter from the Daily Prophet, Nathaniel Hacks, was shocked at what he saw when Potter walked into the room at the back of a bar. Harry arrived looking hale and fit; he looked happy; he looked transformed from his previous photographs in Tempus and The International. He'd obviously made some use of the beaches in Barbados as he was quite tan. Not being a hunted fugitive any longer obviously did the boy a considerable amount of good.

"Mr. Potter, it's good to meet you."

"Mr. Hacks. I'm glad the Daily Prophet wasn't dumb enough to send Rita Skeeter."

Hacks turned a bit pale.

"I see," Harry said. She had been leading the foul vitriol against Harry ever since his first media interview.

He turned around a few times, then turned back to Hacks. It seemed like he hadn't found anything at all. But, with lightning speed, Harry threw an ashtray on the table toward a spot on the wall. The dark spot fell toward the ground...but a huge thump is what hit the floor.

Rita Skeeter slid out of her animagus form as a result of her injuries. "She never does learn, does she?"

Harry pulled out his wand and stunned the vile reporter. Hacks was, frankly, glad. He hadn't wanted to bring the insect Skeeter with him, but the newspaper's editor had insisted.

"I'll be taking her back with me. I have some Auror friends I'd like to introduce her to."

That sounded like trouble to Nathaniel. "I can't let you do that, Mr. Potter. She'll have to go back to Britain...."

"You knowingly smuggled this...person...into a sovereign nation? I wonder how the Auror force here would look at that. I believe they have a most enchanting underwater prison. Would you like to find out?"

"No..." How did this interview go so wrong so quickly?

"It's no problem for the Barbados army to go and invade Britain. They'd arrest everyone at the Daily Prophet and bring them back here for questioning. Take ten minutes. Do you want that?"

"No, Mr. Potter."

"Good. Then print a fair accounting of this interview."

"Yes, sir."

Harry had to smile. Sirius' advice about terrifying his interviewers seemed to work wonders. Sirius had been doubtful that Skeeter would show, but Harry knew it was too rich an opportunity. Sirius 1, Harry 1. No one had to buy anyone else dinner tonight.

As the interview got underway, the questions were less rabid than Harry had expected. The man, Hacks, was probably toning down the interview lest he also get beamed with an ashtray.

Harry answered all the questions as fully as he could – especially on why he felt it necessary to strip Britain of its sovereignty before the world. "Fudge did nothing against Voldemort. His only action was trying to assassinate me. Scrimgeour did nothing in the short time he held the reins. Dumbledore had been in power, of one sort or another, for more than twenty years and did nothing. It was time for a different approach; one that did not ask for a child to go up against Voldemort, as Dumbledore was surely planning."

"You know that?"

"I do. He overheard a prophecy a year that wound up being about me before I was born. He didn't share the contents with anyone, of course, but he did set everything into motion for me to destroy Voldemort. I've already spoken in the media about most of what he did to me...all for no purpose. Voldemort wasn't defeated by me. The French found him, bound him, and stripped his magic less than three days after being called in. Dumbledore, with a large enough force, could have done that decades earlier. He chose not to."

Harry gave the reporter another five minutes before he excused himself. "I have another meeting to attend."

He walked out with a floating Rita Skeeter behind him. He dropped a portkey to America on her and she disappeared. Harry then used a portkey to get to the other side of the island. (He still hadn't got the hang of apparition, even though his American tutors were very patient about it.)

His friends, plus a few, were gathered in a little house Harry had rented for the week. He wanted the chance to really speak with them...but could not quite bring himself to set foot back in Britain.

Harry was cold to Hermione and Ron, but warm with Neville, Seamus, and Dean. He waved at the goofy faces of the Weasley twins, who'd apparently stowed away on this little trip.

"Thanks for coming. I wanted to see all of you since I won't be going back to Hogwarts."

"What?" That came from Hermione.

"I also needed to answer a few questions. For example, Ron....why did you tell anyone about the letter I sent you?"

"Well, George and Fred sort of tortured it out of me. Wanted to make sure you were safe, you see."

"And the others?"

"Fred couldn't keep his mouth shut. Mum asked about it. I wasn't going to lie to her."

Harry nodded. "Hermione...you showed the letter around to a lot of people. Anything to say?"

"I had to. I was so worried, Harry...."

Harry just nodded through the explanation. Ron was Ron; a bit weak minded and subject to bullying from his older brothers. Hermione was Hermione; a smart girl who assumed she was smarter than everyone else around her. Harry could not forgive that sort of arrogance again.

He ignored her for the rest of the meeting. "So, how did you guys sneak away for the afternoon?"

Dean smiled. "Come on, you promised me a beach and beautiful women. I've never been more than 100 kilometers outside my hometown, save for Hogwarts. Of course I was coming."

Seamus laughed. "The Caribbean has the best rum." That earned a laugh from everyone. "Sides, me mam is out of the house for the week. It wasn't hard to sneak away at all. She'd have shrieked like a banshee if I'd told her I was coming to see you. She believed – and still does – a lot of the rot in the Prophet."

Harry shrugged. He couldn't control people's opinions. Harry turned to Neville.

"No one's ever asked me anywhere, Harry. Course I'd come."

He peeked over at the Weasley twins...who were definitely watching the women strolling up and down the beach.

"Boys, if you're good, I'll point you in the direction of a nude beach, right?"

"Harry!" That was also from Hermione. The glare he sent her way was enough to tell her to stuff it.

"So, why don't we have a late lunch. The fridge is packed."

Ron scratched his head and asked, "What's a fridge?"

"For someone who likes to eat, Ron, I'm shocked you don't know," Harry said, laughing. It was good to be among friends, even if they were about to veer off into separate worlds.

Harry planned to master the disciplines needed to become a magical architect, perhaps the most demanding of all magical careers (including Healing). Charms Mastery required. Object Enchanting certificate required. Warding Mastery required. Muggle college degree in architecture and mechanical engineering required. Good taste considered essential.

Harry's collection of Magical Architecture volumes now spanned thirty books, including twelve volumes in the same series as his paperback on the ICW General Assembly Hall. Harry had the basic instructions for creating a magical pyramid, a castle like Beauxbatons, a building deep underground like the British Ministry of Magic, a time-suspended network of caverns, like those near the Camelot of legend, and many others.

Nothing, not even flying, had captivated his mind as much as being in great magical spaces. Harry would learn to make his own – and to make them for others. Along the way, if he picked up some skills to continue defending himself (as the tutors Mr. Weaver arranged seemed to want to do), so much the better.

They lingered over their late lunch for a few hours before reality intruded forcing them all to take their return portkeys.

Sirius came down from his second floor room about then. He'd stayed out of the way for this little reunion as no one wanted to explain Sirius Black's presence to Seamus, Dean, Neville, Fred, or George.

"What'd you think?"

"They're fun, but they're still kids. Where we're going, Sirius, they can't really follow along."

"What, to America?"

"No. To tutoring from American spies; to several academic masteries; to a safe house in Allston; to a muggle college degree; to a life that I can't put back to its simpler, ignorant roots."

Sirius understood that. Prison could change a person; being persecuted like Harry was changed him as well.

Harry had friends in Britain, but he'd have to build a new life in America. One could never go back home.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: And there our story ends. I really enjoyed writing this one, as I like Political!Harry stories and haven't found a lot of well done ones.

I'm surprised no one – out of all the reviewers – guessed that it wasn't Dumbledore attacking Harry (canon used Polyjuice Potion in a majority of the books – 2, 4, 6, and 7 – to fill in a variety of plot holes). In my stories, Dumbledore is usually overconfident, but rarely stupid. The Dumbledore of the third chapter was very stupid, just as the Americans wanted. Their spies aren't above rigging a vote in the ICW. How else would Dumbledore have entered at such a perfect time – after Harry's speech but precisely before the vote?

(Smiles at pulling a prank on his readers.)

Fred and George Ride to the Rescue

A/N: I did an earlier Harry-centric take on this idea (wacky ways/pranks to take out the Death Eaters) with my story 'Marauder's Blessing.' Here's the idea from Fred and George's perspective, plus a lot of their quirks and kinks. Starts in parallel to Harry's sixth year at Hogwarts.

I thought the light hearted mood in HBP, with its emphases on Quidditch and romance, was not at all in following what came before. This Harry – when he does appear – is quite different from canon.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Business was terrible. Terrible.

Fred and George had done well since their opening...until the kiddies went off back to school. Now they were lucky to get a half dozen people inside their shop all day. They got some owl orders, of course, but it wasn't enough to keep them fed. If they didn't do something soon, they'd run through the entire thousand galleon loan from Harry...within months.

"Bloody Death Eaters have got everyone terrified of the Alley. Think the boogey-man will jump out and Crucio them," Fred muttered.

"Well...it's not great that Florian and Ollivander have been drug off, is it? People have a point about being scared. Still, it's not like Death Eaters will walk in during the day and start cursing people. Not even Death Eaters are that stupid, although most witches and wizards wouldn't put it past them. No, real Death Eaters would sneak in at night and set everything ablaze...."

Fred nodded. "Well, what are we going to do about it?"

"Us?"

"That blasted Order isn't doing anything! Aurors are in here buying Shield Cloaks 'cause they can't cast spells better than our Harrikins can. Bunch of worthless wankers. And it's our livelihood going down the toilet, right?"

"Right."

"What we need is something to get these wankers out of the way. Then people will come back to the Alley...and we can sell our pranks."

"Gotcha, brother of mine."

"Well...we need to know when one of these Death Wankers shows up, right?"

George started scribbling on a notepad. The brothers were up in their apartment over the store. Alicia and Angelina weren't expected for another few hours. That was plenty of time to set a plot in motion to get rid of all the Death Wankers...and get business back on track.

George stuck the quill in his mouth for a moment. "So, we want something to incapacitate them when they come here?"

Fred nodded once, then paused to think. "No. We want them to pick something up that they unknowingly carry back with them. Like that cockroach trap you saw. Infect one with something time delayed so he can drag it back to everyone else."

The twins had been researching in muggle London a few times recently. One never knew where good ideas would come from.

"I like that," George said. "We pick an activation date or set it to go off when there's a certain number of Dark Marks in the same place...."

Fred nodded. "Something vile...and permanent, too. This won't be something we'd sell to the kiddies."

"But it's got to scare them, too. They scare the Merlin out of everyone; we'll dish it back to them, right? Scare them and anyone even thinking about joining up."

Fred smiled broadly. "My brother, I think we have an excellent start to our plan."

They sat smiling for a few minutes before George turned to his brother. "What exactly scares a Death Eater?"

Fred was stumped. "No clue. Never been one."

"Excellent point, brother mine. Maybe our usual test subjects will tell us something. If Perfect Prefect Percy were a Death Eater...."

"Which he very well could be," Fred interjected.

"Too right. If Percy were a Death Eater he'd be afraid of failure and looking like an idiot."

"And of anyone not following his rules."

"Or of someone else being elected Chief Bootlicker."

Both twins laughed. Percy always had been useless...and would always be useless.

"If Ickle Ronniekins joined up with the Black and Deadly, then he'd be afraid of spiders...."

"Homework...."

"An empty belly...."

"Pretty girls and dances...."

"Pretty much everything."

"If it were Gin-Gin, then she'd be afraid of only one thing."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Harry Potter getting a clue about girls before she'd got her hooks into him."

"She's a saucy little wench...but Harrikins has remained clueless for an awfully long time. We're sure he likes witches? Oliver Wood seemed to think Harry would turn out an invert."

"Ollie was a deluded pervert. But, for Gin-Gin's sake, I hope Harry likes the ladies."

The pair sat stumped for a few more minutes. Studying their usual test subjects had told them next to nothing about the fears of Death Eaters.

"I guess we must conduct legitimate market research," George said.

Fred sighed. He liked guessing better, but he'd made an exception in this case. "Fine, fine. We'll need to draw up how to get us some 'volunteers.'"

George nodded. Both young men began scratching out some off-the-wall ideas.... They just got stranger and stranger until they were saved...by a noise from downstairs.

Angelina and Alicia unlocked the back door to the shop and walked upstairs. Fred and George perked up. Dinner first then all four would retire to the single, large bed George and Fred slept in.

The Gryffindor Quidditch team – save Harry Potter – had been very, very close for a long time. Fred, George, Oliver sometimes, Angelina, Alicia, and usually Katie, too, met up for 'special' practices a few times a month...massages, co-ed showers, and all the rest. It was, after all, excellent for team building. The team that plays together, wins together was Oliver's motto on those occasions.

Since George and Fred had finished schooling, the meetings with Alicia and Angelina had continued and become more intimate. Oliver had decided upon a course of public and private monogamy now that he was somewhat famous with a Quidditch career.

His loss....

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

In the first week of September, Death Eaters ranging from Yaxley to the Carrows experienced strange memory loss after they went into Diagon or Knockturn Alleys (all in disguise, of course).

They also found their money bags, wands, and any jewelry or artifacts they wore missing. Thieves and brigands. Plus they itched everywhere...for more than a week afterward. Dirty thieves and scrofulous brigands. They had muggle lice or something equally revolting.

They all noticed, but none of them complained to the Dark Lord. None of them mentioned it to anyone else, save for the imprisoned Ollivander who was forced to match them all with new wands.

Of course, the truth was that Fred and George were doing field testing and market research in a sophisticated sort of way.

Step one: placement of dark mark detectors in several obvious places in Knockturn Alley.

Step two: rapid completion of two new 'Not-For-Public-Consumption' wheezes: Candid Candies and Compulsion Curiosities.

Step three: collecting the 'volunteers' whenever the dark mark detectors go off. A Disillusionment Charm and a few steps out the front door brought back nearly twenty volunteers.

Step four: questioning under the effects of a Candid Candy. Brewed somewhat in relation to veritaserum, but with a cinnamon undertone, the Death Eaters spilled their guts. Fred and George got long lists of known Death Eaters and supporters ('their future customers' for the Special Wheezes); short lists of the things each person feared; and anything else that struck Fred or George as interesting to ask.

Step five: the use of a Compulsion Curiosity to force the Death Eaters to completely forget the questioning or anything they noticed remotely related to it.

Step six: returning said Death Eaters to a putrid section of Knockturn Alley an hour or two after sundown. It wouldn't have been at all useful to turn these bastards over to the Ministry. Merlin knew that a place that hired the likes of Umbridge were only too sympathetic to these Death Eaters.

Instead, the final version of the planned Wheezes would ensure these people were never a problem again...screw the Wizengamot.

The market research results were fairly interesting. They had nineteen sets of data to unravel.

"Twelve of them are most afraid of the Dark Lord...." George read off the list.

"Figures," Fred muttered. "Probably joined up out of fear, the useless tits."

"Two are most afraid of Healers. One is afraid of clowns; another wrote that he is afraid of daisies.... This is a bust. We can't torture Death Eaters by sicking the Dark Lord or the St. Mungo's staff on them."

"We could dress Mum up as a nurse, perhaps.... An angel of death motif?"

A snort was the only response.

"Do you think sending out a clown with a bunch of daisies will do anything? Well, what about the other questions?"

"I did ask what they valued most," George said.

"And?"

"Patience." George slowly flipped through the pages. "This might be interesting. See?" George pushed the sheaf of papers toward his brothers.

"Oh... They all value roughly the same things. So...taking away something one values...."

"Would likely make them go crazy. Angry, terrified, fearful: the whole works."

The twins began digging through their lists of nasty, experimental ideas to see what they could match up with what they'd learned from the Death Eaters.

It took them long into the night to match up the three things Death Eaters treasured most with three plots the Weasleys could quickly hatch.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

At the end of the second week of September, the goblins inside Gringotts sat in silent bewilderment as a procession of known blood purists visited the bank for odd reasons.

All dozen wanted their vaults liquidated into Muggle money, British pounds. Then each of them asked for the goblins to arrange anonymous donations with the money.

The goblins didn't know how to react beyond simple shock. These blood purists helped out poor, hungry, blind, deaf muggles, plus their children and their pets and their diseases. It made no sense.

Still, the goblins, through their human banking partners, cut cheques to Oxfam, Help the Aged, Mercy in Action, British Deaf Association, Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, Imperial Cancer Research Fund, Samaritans, Save the Children Fund, Dogs Trust, YMCA England, Childline Scotland, and the RSPCA.

The goblins got a cut through their galleons-to-pounds transaction fees so they didn't complain.

The blood purists didn't even remember what they'd done. It would take a few days before the first person reappeared at Gringotts to discover he no longer had any galleons at all.

By then it was too late for everyone involved.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

George snuck out past the Leaky Cauldron and purchased a selection of Muggle newspapers. It took him and his brother a while to decide what to do with the clippings.

"RSPCA Reports Largest Anonymous Donation in Its History."

"YMCA England to Use Donations to Refurbish Facilities."

"Imperial Cancer Research Fund Awards Additional 60 Grants to Researchers."

It created a minor furor in the news for several days. No one could trace where the money came from; it had just appeared out of nowhere.

Fred and George continued making the trek out to purchase Muggle newspapers so they could add the stories to their upstairs Wall of Wackiness...

The next trip out to the Muggle side of the Leaky Cauldron – four days after the Death Eaters made their forced donations – revealed another interesting sight. Fred stumbled across his least favorite of all his Hogwarts Defense teachers ordering a kebab from a street vendor.

The fat child-torturer looked like a pink balloon in her robes. How she intended to pass for a Muggle while stuffing her face, Fred didn't know. Perhaps the Muggles were more permissive of odd dressing habits from the morbidly obese.

No one gave her a second look as she proceeded to cram three fully loaded kebabs down her gullet. The vendor serving her looked a mite ill at the vision, though.

Fred hid himself in an alleyway near where the foul Umbridge would have to pass to return to the wizarding world. It took her another three kebabs before she seemed to have a full enough belly to waddle back toward the Leaky.

Fred let her get within a few feet – and out of the view of the other Muggles – before he stunned her. He quickly summoned her back into the alleyway.

A few moments later, Fred stepped out of the alley with an unconscious toad in his hand.

Fred and George had barely scraped an 'A' in their Transfiguration OWL, but it didn't mean they couldn't perform the spellwork. They just hated writing essays – and were frankly terrible at it. (At least seventy five percent of all the OWL scores were written. They'd earned 'O's on their spellwork and 'D's on their essays.)

Still, for this, McGonagall would have been proud. Semi-reptilian-partially-human to fully reptilian transfiguration.

Now...what to do with the vicious toad. She wasn't likely to be a Death Eater, as she was clearly incompetent with a wand, but she

behaved like them and seemed to agree with them. Fred would have to consult with his brother to see what they could do.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Eight days after goblins were hit by strangeness of every variety, the Ministry's Office of Familial Affairs got a number of visits, some by people who were wanted criminals.

The officials in the dusty office listened to all requests, granted them, and then turned over a surprising number of wanted criminals to the Aurors.

Lucius Malfoy showed up, divorced his wife, disowned his son, and then had his name changed to Chef Boyardee. The Aurors gladly called him Chef when they took him into custody.

Bellatrix Lestrange, her husband, and his brother arrived to dissolve their relationships and the Lestrange name. Bellatrix demanded to be called Aunt Jemima. Rabastan registered his new name as Yeasty Marmite; Rodolphus became Cadbury Flake. All three went quietly with the Aurors.

A reputedly dead wizard named Peter Pettigrew came into the office to change his name to Dirty Uncle Ben. Aurors handled him with care – as he'd supposedly been dead for more than a decade – but eventually he was thoroughly interrogated and put in a heavily warded cell.

It was rather tricky to keep a small-animal animagus around.

Unfortunately for the Aurors, all the recaptured Death Eaters, including Rat Man Pettigrew or Dirty Uncle Ben, 'escaped' when three turn coat Aurors let them out of their manacles when they were on the Azkaban docks.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Fred and George hung pictures of all those re-captured by the Ministry. Neither twin expected that the mild compulsion they'd seeded for those bearing the Dark Mark would send so many Death Eaters back into the hands of the Ministry...but it did. Thirty hours after those folks visited Diagon or Knockturn Alley – along with

another thirty hours for any Death Eaters they came into contact with – they had the overwhelming desire to destroy their family names...and to pick oddities culled from the Muggle world.

It wasn't a huge surprise that the new Minister was incompetent at holding onto these captured terrorists.... The newspaper was already screaming for his head.

Couldn't have happened to a nicer wizard. Dad had told a few tales of some of the Aurors he'd worked with over the years. Scrimgeour sounded like a suck-up and an incompetent.

The little aquarium they'd acquired for their work-room was finally filled with a nice selection of toads.

They had to decide what to do with the non Death Eaters they'd captured. Umbridge had been the first; then they found that fool Fudge a few days later. Bad enough he'd kept their father from the promotions he deserved, but he was also best chums with good old Malfoy...or, rather, Chef Boyardee.

Then there was Brighton Milner, one of their regular suppliers from down Knockturn Alley...who had decided to try and cheat Fred and George with a fake order of erumpent fluid.

There was also Tobias Knockridge, a Hufflepuff three years older than the twins, who had attempted to burgle the store about three nights earlier. The man was obviously down on his luck...but the twins couldn't abide thieves.

"I say we make the change permanent and then throw them in a pond...."

"You're thinking of frogs, George. Toads are more land creatures, I believe."

"Fine, then, brother of mine. What's your plan?"

"Well, we could certainly keep them here. We can always find bits of garbage to feed them.... But I was wondering if we might perhaps turn them into a profit."

George smiled. He liked the devious mind his brother possessed.

"Fudge certainly cost Dad a pretty penny from the promotions he never got. Umbridge wasted a year's worth of tuition at fine old Hoggy. Then these two morons tried to cheat us or steal from us. I say we earn some money back."

"And how will we do this?"

"We will trade four toads to Rumpelmeyer's in Knockturn. We've long wanted some green, plaited hag's hair for that experiment. I think four toads such as these will provide a fine incentive to someone like Rumpelmeyer...."

"But he would only hand over hag's hair if he could get more of it. Only for a wizard's ultimate sacrifice...." George stopped talking then as realization hit him. "Are you serious?"

Fred shrugged. "He'll realize what these toads are. We'll claim we bought perfectly useless toads in a muggle pet shop; they wouldn't give up any of their venom. He'll examine them and then begin driving a hard bargain. We'll eventually get the hag's hair...and he'll think he cheated us. He'll probably ask for the pet shop name to see which witch or wizard has been turning his enemies into toads and dumping them in the muggle world...."

George took a few seconds to ponder. "Fine. None of the four deserve to use magic any more. Rumpelmeyer will strip them clean."

Fred muttered. "Then he'll probably chop them up and eat them in a stew, crazy old vampire."

George began to turn green before he finally tamped down his revulsion. "We're doing this for a safer Diagon Alley. We'll do our work here; then we'll trust in ickle Harrykins to force the Ministry bastards to clean up their act."

"Oy, that boy hates his fame. Dumbledore...."

"Dumbledore is a fossil. Harry is the future. He hates his fame, true, but he loathes the Ministry even more. We'll drop a suggestion in his ear a bit later."

"Bull in a china shop, he is."

"Exactly. We should put some Eaves Droppers into the Ministry the next time we visit the Committee for Experimental Charms. Good way to dig up dirt."

"I like the way you think, brother of mine."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The last 'prank' happened in the last week of September. It was rather an extraordinary piece of magic.

The twins had let their taggers run for a full two weeks, attaching the time delayed viral spell to ensure they got as many marked Death Eaters as possible.

It was a multi-part spell. It was set to spread to anyone else within a hundred meters who possessed the Dark Mark or a dark soul. It was set to fully activate at ten in the morning on September 28. When active it would strip its witch or wizard of all his magic to power a forced apparition to Diagon Alley – the Central Square beyond Gringotts – punching through even the strongest of wards.

That morning of the 28th, Harry Potter received a letter from the twins – cryptic, but intriguing – and walked outside the Hogwarts wards. A portkey took him to Diagon Alley a full twenty minutes before anyone knew anything odd would be happening today.

"Harry, got our note?"

"I'm here."

"Right in one," Fred continued. "We heard a rather odd rumor down Knockturn yesterday. Apparently Voldemort is planning something for the Alley today. Using some kind of experimental device or something. Awful good chance it will leave them temporarily stunned or powerless. Thought you might want to see if he and his evil witch were along for the ride."

Harry's jaw tightened. "Wouldn't miss 'seeing' Bellatrix for the world."

George handed Harry a light grey cloak and a pale wand. "We thought you might like some anonymity. The wand is untraceable, of

course. We had to learn to make real wands in order to make fake ones, didn't we? Just snap it after you're done. We figure it'll take the Aurors twenty minutes to respond, those useless plonkers. While you're away, we'll just sit here and establish your alibi, won't we?"

Harry smiled as he put on the cloak.

"A pair of jokers like yourselves wouldn't know anything about the missing wealth and dissolved families of a number of formerly prominent families? Or the disappearances of such personages as Cornelius Fubbed and Dolores Useless?"

"No idea, ickle Harrikins."

Harry nodded as he left the shop in his grey cloak. The boy did a few quick charms to Disillusion himself with his new wand. It seemed to work like a champ.

"He's a lot scarier these days," Fred said.

"Sirius dying changed him, hardened him," George said. "I'd not like to meet him in a dark alley."

"He looked like he knew exactly what was going on. Have we ever been that transparent?"

"Apparently we are to him."

"He'll be taking out the trash most effectively."

"Business should be back in days, brother of mine." The twins smiled. They'd pulled several excellent pranks and now they would soon be back to making a legacy as premiere purveyors of pranks.

"Just in time. Just...." Here, the twins stopped talking and began listening to screams in the distance. It sounded like a procession of simple Reductos impacting...the useless and soon-to-be-dead.

It took ickle Harrikins only three minutes to return.

"Whatever 'experiment' they tried definitely stunned the lot of them. I'm fairly sure they won't be getting back up again. Voldemort's head is on a pike outside Gringotts, right between Bellatrix Lestrange and

Peter Pettigrew. None of the ones who woke up near the end even seemed to be able to use their wands. Nice effect. I won't even ask if it was temporary or permanent; just remind me never to piss the pair of you off. Now, the Aurors should be along in fifteen minutes, right? How about a portkey back to Hogwarts then? I have Transfiguration in ten minutes."

"Here you go."

"We'll send along a letter in a day or two with some other thoughts."

Harry smiled. "The wand broke easily, by the way, very nice. Worked well; not as good as what Ollivander sold me, but darned close. Send along a few more of those. I have my eye on a couple Slytherins who could use some...discipline."

Fred and George couldn't say a thing before Harry vanished from their shop.

"Better not let Angelina or Alicia get a hold of him. Our play time would be over. Instead of four in our bed, it would be three in Harry's...."

"Well, we always did resist inviting the little mite to our special 'Quidditch' practices, although Ollie was always leering at the kid. Never too late, especially as he doesn't look like he's about to die of malnutrition. Perhaps five would fit in our bed...."

"Ickle Gin-Gin would kill us, but Angelina and Alicia would certainly play along."

"We're not inviting our sister. She'd never know, boyo. And we're not letting that pervert Wood back in either. Dumping us all like that. Katie can make her way in, if she'd like, and maybe Harry...."

"Is it wrong that I'm feeling turned on?" George asked. "It wasn't erotic at all on paper. Death Eater's Fear Number Three: Turning into a squib just before dueling Harry Potter."

"Want me to see if Angelina or Alicia can stop over for lunch? Help relieve the tension...."

"Sweet Merlin. I've never seen anything so...." Words of every sort failed George then.

"It reminds you what magic really is."

"Yup. It's not McGonagall turning pincushions into radishes or Snape leering at you while making a Swelling Solution. Harry is magic."

By now, both twins were rather turned on. They tried, with limited success, to turn the conversation to something safer.

"So...business will be back."

"Give it a few days."

"And we should get back to thinking up new items we can actually sell."

"And we need a new place to keep the dangerous stuff...."

"You're already thinking ahead, making sure Harry doesn't nose around in our workroom, aren't you?"

George smiled and shrugged. "I think it'd be nice to have a new pal for our little evening and weekend activities. Potter's not so ickle any more, is he?"

Fred's smile turned positively lustful. "We shall find out, brother of mine. We shall certainly find out."

They sat in blissful silence for another ten minutes before the Aurors finally arrived to begin mopping up the mess. Try as they might, however, they couldn't dispel whatever sticking charm Harry had used on the heads in front of Gringotts. It took ten days before they finally disappeared. Ten days of joy, confusion, elation, and celebration. Voldemort was dead...again...and no one knew how (save Fred, George, and Harry). No more new heroes; no more Men-Who-Conquered labels. Just a return to brisk business in Diagon Alley.

On another note, Harry did accept an invitation to share Christmas with the Weasley twins that year. The bed was quite full above their

store, but merriment and good cheer were had by all...many times every night.

Shaken, Not Stirred

A/N: Rorschach's Blot did a riff on Harry Potter becoming the ward of 007. That got me thinking: Sean Connery, Roger Moore, and...Harry Potter. Meet the newest member of Her Majesty's Secret Service. (Bond was the first fantasy universe I ever loved; thus this homage.)

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter, newly minted graduate of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, walked alone on the road down to Hogsmeade. His seventh and final year at Hogwarts had been the worst: sure, he'd destroyed the Dark Lord, but he'd also exposed all of his 'friends' as Order of the Phoenix stooges and spies, most of his teachers as complicit in the abuse he'd suffered for nearly two decades, and the Ministry itself as nearly as evil as the Dark Lord he'd had to kill off.

Harry Potter was done with these fools...but he didn't know where he would go next. He had gold aplenty; a disturbing house in London; a house elf more demented than anyone thought possible. He was bored and couldn't stand to be around so much worthlessness....

He was coming up on the ward line while everyone else was still back at Hogwarts celebrating. He had another dozen steps before he was free to apparate when an odd woman in a pants suit stepped out of the forest.

"Mr. Potter?"

"Harry, ma'am. Call me Harry." He had never seen a witch dressed as, well, professionally as this woman did.

The old woman smiled. "Very well. I have come to offer you a job, Mr. Potter."

"Which Quidditch team are you with, ma'am? I declined all the offers already. And I know you're not from the Ministry, as I put their last three recruiters into long-term comas. And you don't look like someone who would work with one of those traitorous Weasleys in Diagon Alley...."

"Mr. Potter, I work for Her Majesty in a little known branch of Her Government. I am what you might call a spymaster."

At that, Harry had to laugh. She looked like a well dressed...barrister or an accountant.

"We all have our disguises, Mr. Potter...."

He quickly realized the old woman might perhaps be serious.

"I don't know what you know about me, but I think I'd be the lousiest spy on the face of the earth...."

The old woman smiled. "Lack of hubris, just as I was told. I think that quality alone would make you better than ninety percent of our applicants."

Harry barely held in a chuckle at what the woman said.

"Mr. Potter, from the dossier I have gathered, you have exceptional luck, amazing dexterity, courage somewhat tempered with cunning, some familiarity with magical combat, a rather useful skill in adapting your body to look like other people, some ability to become invisible upon command, and you've already blooded yourself against better trained enemies. Last, but not least, you're even more doubtful about the illegal Ministry of Magic than I am. (One day, should you survive the training, I'd suspect you'll be returning on more than one mission to that particular place.) I don't come out to recruit very often in person, but your talents are what Her Majesty needs at this time."

"You're serious then?"

"Does it look like I joke, Mr. Potter?"

"Err, no, not really."

"I'll expect you for a formal interview and general screening next Thursday at seven o'clock. Here are the details. I do hope you'll come. We will be able to put your talents to good use."

Harry looked at the thin sheet of paper. "I guess it can't hurt. If I don't like it, I can just obliviate everyone...."

The old woman smiled. "We do have access to ward crafters, Mr. Potter. I wouldn't count on your magic helping you too much in this interview."

The old woman walked back into the forest. A minute later, Harry watched as a helicopter lifted off from inside the Forbidden Forest and flew back toward London.

Electricity could work in magical places...interesting. Muggles could get to Hogwarts. The Queen had people surveying the magical world, even recruiting from it. Harry began to wonder what else he 'knew' that wasn't actually true. It seemed wizards and witches were gleefully ignorant of a lot of things.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry walked into the interview room that the mysterious woman had notified him of the week before and was immediately attacked from all sides.

Of course, Harry was about as paranoid as old Alastor Moody, so he'd had his wand up his sleeve, but the two spells he attempted were both inhibited by the wards. He dodged, only to get punched in the side. He tried to roll out of the way only to get clobbered about the face and upper chest.

It was a brutal, humiliating three minutes before a woman's voice called out, "Stop."

Harry took a breather before sitting up from where he'd been pummeled almost into the concrete flooring.

"What the bloody hell was that?"

"An interview," said an attractive, older, blonde woman. "Four ninjas and three Russian-trained assassins...a standard complement you'll be expected to defeat if you're accepted into the program."

Harry looked at his seven attackers. None of them were the slightest bit bloody. Great.

"I thought an interview was talking," Harry said.

"Actions speak louder than words. I will say, Mr. Potter, that you weren't completely useless. Three minutes of torture isn't the record for the interview, but it's better than eighty percent of the people we see here."

"Well, I'm a scrawny kid...."

"With no martial arts training. Understood. If you stick around, someone your size and weight should be quite skilled at subduing several attackers. I think you could do well; you have my blessing to advance on to the verbal portion of the interview."

Harry was standing by now and surveyed the Spartan room. This was not the way he expected his Thursday to go. Merlin, he didn't even need a job.

"My name, by the way, is Pussy Galore. I head up the Seduction component of your field training."

"Seduction?"

"Oh yes, all field agents are trained in a wide variety of skills. For instance, I'm a militant lesbian – I used to lead an American gang of militant, acrobatic, criminal lesbians before the British showed me the 'error' of my ways – but you'll have to get me into the sack and perform before you pass that component. I'm one tough cookie."

Harry gulped. He was still a virgin. How was he supposed to seduce this well-maintained cougar of a woman?

"Practice, Harry. Practice makes perfect."

Pussy pointed to the door at the rear of the room. "Your next interview is in there."

Harry took a second to straighten his clothes and clutch at his wand. There was a good chance it wouldn't work in the next room, either, but he did want to show a semblance of preparation.

He looked to the ninjas and assassins. "I'll be seeing you all later."

He got back seven evil smirks.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The next room looked like a bureaucrat's office – from the late 1960s. A rather odd, balding sort of man sat behind one desk.

"Please be seated, Mr. Potter. I'll be with you in a moment."

Harry took a seat on a rickety chair and took in his surroundings. He figured this was another sort of test. There was one wall filled with labeled and very thick file folders.

Dr. No. Mr. Big. Janus. Largo. Hugo Drax. Scaramanga. Auric Goldfinger. An entire shelf was devoted to one person named Ernst Stavros Blofeld. A thin, parched folder was labeled Colonel Kleb.

On one of the many unoccupied desks were books scattered around on various makes and models of rifles and explosives.

Another desk held a dozen atlases and books on foreign locales and customs.

Harry began to survey the other parts of the shambled office when the man across from him looked up and cleared his throat.

"I'm called the Admiral around these parts. I was once the head of the department, M as it were, but I retired from that level of stress. I am the unofficial department bullshit detector. Can spot any lies at fifty meters, I can. So...we're going to do the behavioral interview now."

"Alright," Harry said.

"Let's start with your education. We're going to go year by year, detailing each subject you took, your grades, your triumphs and your failings."

It sounded easy, but ninety minutes later Harry felt even more beat up after discussing his final year at Hogwarts. It was preferable to battle with the ninjas over sitting here talking to this man.

"Now, let us discuss how you might handle certain situations. I'll describe a scenario; then you tell me the closest thing in your

experience to match it. How did you handle it then? How would you handle it now? Let's start with: you're about to walk into a certain trap, but decide to move forward anyway."

The Admiral looked at Harry. Harry didn't know which story of his to tell. Going after the Philosopher's Stone? Saving Ginny Weasley from Voldemort and a basilisk? Saving Buckbeak and his godfather? Going to the Department of Mysteries and losing his godfather? Going after Voldemort for the final confrontation?

Harry settled on the story of the Department of Mysteries. That was the one time he'd been positive he was walking into an ambush.

"Someone got away with committing one or more crimes. What do you do?"

This was harder for Harry to answer. Finally he settled on Dolores Umbridge.

"A so-called teacher was appointed to my school and proceeded to inflict torture on the students. She had the backing of the government, political appointment you see, and even went so far as to get the school's headmaster sacked. A vicious, vicious lady; actually tortured or attempted to torture over forty students at various points. I got some of the worst of it. When she was finally ousted, the headmaster along with the government refused to force her to trial for what she did, even though it was worthy of a life sentence. The foul woman just slunk back into her old government job." Harry peeled back his sleeve a bit and showed off his 'other' scar.

"I said nothing at the time. I waited until the time was right. She sided with that terrorist you might have heard about, Tom Riddle. When I went to take care of him, I stopped off at the teacher's usual hangout first. I gave her a choice: sign a full confession of all her crimes or else she could die. She chose to fight. I killed her, took a moment to set her house on fire, and then proceeded on my merry way. People still seem to think she was killed by Death Eaters – rather than that she was a Death Eater or a supporter. But...what good does the whole truth ever do?"

"Precisely. If you were faced with the same situation again – or something similar – what would you do?"

"Probably much the same. Permit the freed criminal to face criminal justice...or finish the situation off myself. If it were someone truly dangerous, then perhaps I wouldn't even give him or her the option."

"You are given an order to do something clearly illegal and even immoral by your personal standards. What do you do?"

The questions continued for hours. Harry's head felt empty and his stomach rumbled in hunger long before the questions ceased.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry was starving and more than a little tired when he was led into a rather posh, cavernous hall. The table in the room took up much of the space and ran for more than a hundred meters.

"Please sit, Mr. Potter," came a voice from a darkened corner. Harry almost cursed to himself; he hadn't noticed.

"Slipping a bit, I see. That's partly why we schedule this particular session so late in the day. We've got your defenses down a bit, haven't we?"

"I'd say so," Harry admitted.

"Have a seat on the right side of the table. The first course will be soup. Would you care for some port?"

Harry recognized the question as another sort of test. But Harry knew nothing of muggle customs...as the Dursleys had never taught him anything of value in that department.

"As this is an interview, sir, I think I must decline."

The man walked out of the shadows slowly nodding his head. "It was, of course, a trick question. Port is what we classify as a digestif, something for after dinner conversation. Perhaps with dessert or cheese. In any case, it would never be paired with soup. So, you get adequate marks for recognizing the challenge and not failing it...however, your rationale was wrong. You might very well have to drink – or use drugs – or even commit a crime when on the job. The Ethics training will be very useful for you, Mr. Potter."

The man sat down and rang a small silver bell. Shortly thereafter a man wheeled out a small cart with a massive silver tureen on it. Shortly thereafter, Harry got two ladles of soup in his bowl.

He had never, for all his vast imagination, thought of an interview like this one. Roughed up physically; roughed up mentally; then a tricky interview over a meal (with real silverware, no less). He felt continually out of his depth. He'd never dined in a muggle restaurant, not a nice one.

Harry watched his interviewer and copied, changing a few things to hide what he was doing. The man, for example, salted his food before tasting it. Harry waited to see what the soup tasted like first – no salt needed, it turned out, although it did need a touch of pepper. If there was one thing Harry had learned in the muggle world, it was food preparation.

"You do know, Mr. Potter, that you will have to pass a variety of classes during training. Let's discuss that briefly to see where you are."

"Fine, sir. But may I ask you what I should call you?"

"I maintain no identity here. Sir will work for now."

Harry just nodded.

"You will have to be trained to handle yourself in any circumstance: at an embassy party, playing the part of a street person in Calcutta, behind the wheel of a car, in an airplane emergency, using an alternate identity. You'll be trained to gather intelligence, to ferret out traitors to the British government, to infiltrate drug gangs or terrorist fronts or foreign governments, to 'handle' security threats in a permanent fashion. I know about your more esoteric skills with...a magic wand, but you will also need to know how to do all of this without one. Once you're prepared, we'll send you back through much of the training so you can apply your...magic to it."

"How long does this training last?"

"Your whole life, Mr. Potter. But the official version lasts for eighteen months. We figure it will take another six after that to allow you to

blend magic into what you've learned. It would be faster to do it all in one go, of course, but we have relatively few personnel and almost no other trainees who are authorized to know of magic. The Admiral, M, and I are among the few."

"Can you tell me what the next part of the interview might be?"

"Indeed I cannot. It is, however, perhaps the most difficult and the simplest. You will understand my opacity better. Shall we have our vegetables now? I understand they're serving asparagus and a cheese soufflé, then we'll partake of pheasant before some rather fine Dover sole. Dessert is to be fresh strawberries, scones, and clotted cream."

Harry was stuffed, body, mind, and soul, before he left that grand dining room. It felt like his interview had already stretched on for hours.

With a bit of nervousness, he walked through the next door on his way through his interview. The unnamed man who'd told him so much and so little just smiled a bit as Harry walked to his next part.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry walked through a partially lit corridor with exposed cement bricks. There was another door at the very end.

Harry gripped it, opened the door, and walked through.

He didn't even have time to see the man who clubbed the back of his head. Harry crumpled to the ground moments later.

When Harry woke he was naked and strapped to a freezing metal chair. He didn't say anything when he roused, but tried to get a sense of where he was. If Harry had left any Death Eaters alive – and it was possible – then this could be their work...but it could also be another part of the interview...a screwed up part.

Harry managed to keep his awakened state a secret for maybe five minutes. That ended when someone pounded the back of his head.

"Wake up, you lousy spy."

Harry slowly looked up. There were four people in the room. Three men; one woman (who seemed to be surveying Harry's body with some interest).

"Let's see here. A spy lurking through the SIS Building. I wonder how he got here? Care to tell us?"

Harry had signed the Official Secrets Act when he was with the Admiral. He, legally, couldn't say anything. "I have nothing to say."

"Nothing to say. You're a pretty young man. Tanker here fancies pretty young men, doesn't he? Shall the other three of us step out of the room while Tanker makes your acquaintance, pretty little man?"

"I have nothing to say."

The one called Tanker stepped forward and proceeded to crush Harry's scrotum and its precious contents. He bit back the nauseating pain and said nothing, not even a whimper.

"Pretty little bollocks. Too bad you'll never be able to father some more pretty little children. Are you quite sure you won't tell us what we want to know? Why are you here?"

"I have nothing to say."

The pressure abated, but Harry knew only to expect something worse. These four reminded Harry of Dudley's little gang (although these ones were obviously better trained, they still took a lot of pleasure in inflicting pain on others).

The torture and the pointless questions continued for a long time. Harry was burned with cigars on his upper thighs and whipped on his shoulders and back. Eventually he was pulled from his chair and plunged, whole body, into a freezing tank of water. He was held underneath long past the point at which his lungs cried out for air...so long he blacked out once more.

When he woke next, he was dressed in pajamas and resting on a bed in a dark room. Almost as soon as Harry opened his eyes, someone dressed like a nurse came into the room and began checking on Harry.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You've passed all but the last of your examinations."

Harry's head thudded back into his pillow.

"My department is warned about every interview, but we see few people make it this far, sir. I don't think the last part can be any harder than what you've already faced."

Harry knew better than to believe the young woman.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry awoke from a deep, healing sleep some time later. The old woman who'd flown to Hogwarts to recruit him was sitting in a chair beside his bed.

"Is this how you greet all your applicants," Harry asked.

"Yes," the woman said. "We don't have time to waste on the self-deluded fools who will eventually wash out of our training. The interview is harsh, but very effective."

"You really burned me...and drowned me?"

The woman nodded again. "We do not condone torture, but we will be sending you into places that have no such hesitations. You must know what it is like; you must know how to withstand it as best you can. You were quite stoic, I understand...."

"I have faced worse."

"I am sorry to hear that. Why don't we get started with the final phase of your interview?"

"From my hospital bed?"

"You should realize that the entire experience is designed to throw you off your comfort zone as you plunge into completely alien environments. It's a mere pale shadow of what real field work is like. But if you cannot survive the interview, you will not survive the job."

Harry just nodded. In a disturbing sense, what she said was true.

"Let us begin your test of creative thinking. I will ask you a question you cannot possibly answer. You will ask me questions until you have enough information to give me an answer. Understand?"

Harry nodded.

"We have learned of the existence of a shadowy group of terrorists-for-hire. It is said that they have been involved in three recent high-profile bombings in Europe. Tell me where their base or bases of operation are located."

"How many people are suspected to be in the group?"

"It is unknown."

"Do they have any hallmarks or unusual habits?"

"A few. The one person the Spanish infiltrated into a suspected cell was later found half devoured by a shark or other aquatic animal. The bombs used in Europe are made from restricted military grade plastic explosive – nothing homemade about them. We suspect the group's funding comes through Switzerland, but have been unable to trace anything further back."

Harry pondered the information and tried to grasp at what some of the details meant. What were cells? How could someone get ahold of restricted military weapons? And where in the world did the sharks come in?

"What made you decide these three European bombings were the responsibility of this group?"

The woman smiled. "They were precisely one month apart from each other; the first on a grocery store in one of the areas frequented by French politicians. The competence of the attacks, plus their ability to penetrate to high security targets, leads us to suspect a highly organized group."

None of that meant anything to Harry.

"Where would someone get ahold of a shark here? I thought they were in South Africa, Australia, maybe Mexico or the southern United States."

"We don't know."

Harry smiled. The woman answered his pointless questions and refused his worthy questions.

"Well, then, that's where I'd start. Identify the purveyors of live sharks in Europe. Track down those they sell to – 'aquariums' that don't really exist or the odd private collector who seems to have too many. I've seen that fictional series your branch put out, the Bond movies, and most of the bad guys seem to have sharks, electric eels, piranha, massive pythons, or great venomous octopi. Well, track down the suppliers of exotic animals and then look for their lairs. Right?"

The woman sitting to the side of his bed just smiled. "It is creative and might just possibly work."

"Precisely. You can't just fish a shark out of the sea and expect it to live. You'd have to do some serious sort of work to keep it alive. Expensive and noticeable."

The interview moved on from there to a dozen other 'hypothetical' situations before the woman – who was supposed to be called M – dropped the final bomb. "Well, let's get you dressed so you can join the SAS on a mission. You'll be there as an observer while they storm a terrorist compound on Malta. Ready?"

"Now?"

"What better time?"

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

An aching, annoyed Harry Potter took his first helicopter ride, after getting off his first ride in a plane. He had only a few moments left before he was to 'observe' his first covert action.

The two hours that followed had him riveted. Death Eaters had nothing on these terrorists. A Reductor or a Killing Curse could kill

one person every few seconds; these muggle weapons could kill twenty people in the blink of an eye. Explosives filled the night.

When it was over, Harry was convinced. He would join Her Majesty's Secret Service. He would devote his next years of his life to...something different. He would become a '00' and leave his old name behind. He would be Jeffrey Teague if he was appointed 003 or Lionel Twilling if he became 005 or James Bond if he became 007. He no longer needed, or wanted, to be Harry Potter.

A new world awaited him.

He hoped he was up for the challenge.

Dark Harry Wakes Up

Harry Wakes Up

Fifth year. Harry has just saved Arthur Weasley's life...only to be told of his Occlumency lessons from Snape, about the worst punishment possible. Harry wakes up.

A/N: Manipulative Dumbledore stories usually have Harry raging a bit, trying to hurt Dumbledore, or else retreating off, leaving Dumbledore in charge of Hogwarts. Here's another twist. Darkish!

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Wake up, Professor."

The aged headmaster startled awake. His eyes began swiveling in his head trying to make sense of what was happening. He hadn't been roused from a dead sleep in years.

"Professor," the voice said again.

Albus reached for his wand, but found he couldn't move. He was able to move his head...and saw that someone was in his private bedroom. Albus' keen eyes caught sight of the Elder Wand glinting in a sliver of moonlight. Albus just barely prevented himself from swearing.

"Good, the draught is working. A keen mind and a frozen body."

"Fawkes," the Professor yelled out...but no phoenix appeared.

"He's indisposed, Professor," the voice said again.

Dumbledore's heart raced. He tried to piece together what was happening. The voice...that voice was familiar.

"Harry?"

"Good, Professor." Harry walked forward. He flicked the wand and a small glowing ball of light emerged. It was just enough for Albus to see how busy Harry had been.

"What are you doing?"

"Nudging destiny along a different path, the right path."

"What?"

"I figured it all out, you know. Your grand and ridiculous plan...."

"What are you talking about, Harry?"

Harry smiled and then waved the Elder Wand. A comfortable chair appeared. Harry sat and leaned forward a bit.

"That attack on Mr. Weasley. It got me thinking. The whole Order of the Phoenix.... I read about how you sacrificed one of your members to a term in Azkaban. Mr. Weasley almost sacrificed his life guarding something down there. What could it be? Three nights ago, I went and 'asked' Mr. Weasley. Although he doesn't remember telling me, he did. Befuddlement draught, useful. What did I hear about? A prophecy...."

Albus paled.

"It took me some time to puzzle everything out. Why would you ignore me and try to protect this prophecy in such obvious ways? It was almost like first year all over again...bread crumbs leading me right to the Philosopher's Stone. This year, you were either guarding a prophecy sphere or painting a target on it. You were trying to make it intriguing to me and the other side...the dreams I've been having do the same thing. Both sides are marking it out as contested ground...and I am to be the champion, right?"

Albus began to shake. He was trying to break whatever was holding him in place.

"All the vaunted protections used by the Department of Mysteries...and they never guarded against magical creatures. You could get in there with your phoenix...."

"Fawkes," Albus shouted out again. Again the phoenix did not appear.

"I forced a burning day on him, Professor. A good dousing with aged basilisk venom will do that. He should be back to normal in a few weeks...."

Albus gasped. There wasn't an act more evil than trying to kill a phoenix or a unicorn. Had Harry slid so far already?

"Nothing can kill a phoenix, Professor. But your slavish familiar will be a lot less useful in the coming days...that's plenty for me."

"A few days will do you no good, boy."

Albus' civilized veneer slipped a bit. Harry just smiled.

"A few hours are all I need, Professor. Anyway, the Department of Mysteries wasn't warded against phoenixes, vampires, or house elves. I had a very eager friend of mine take a quick stroll into the Hall of Prophecies. He used a cloth bag and a stick to knock the ball into the bag. I began listening to the 'official' prophecy three nights ago...."

Albus' fear relented.

"I suspected you would react that way."

Albus' face fell again.

"Thank you for the confirmation. It didn't sound like it was worth letting your people die for.... Basically it said nothing: an event leading to a marking; some specious, unknown power; an expected life or death confrontation. Worthless."

"It's the truth," Albus protested. "Sybil Trelawney told it to me more than a year before you were born, Harry. It was in my brother's tavern...."

"No, she told you a prophecy a year before I was born, but it was here. Here, at Hogwarts, where you always hold interviews. You created an altered version and then staged a second meeting in a semi-public place known to be frequented by Death Eaters. You registered this version in the Department of Mysteries."

"You can't believe such a thing, my boy." The grandfatherly patina sounded hollow.

"You shouldn't keep incriminating things in your pensieve, Professor. It's a tough burden to bear, isn't it? Have to remove it from your mind from time to time, right? The real prophecy...your death sentence, literal and figurative."

"I don't know what you think you know, Harry, but you don't understand."

Harry stood up.

"I understand that you painted a target on my parents – and even Neville's parents – so that you could avoid your fate. You continued sending others out to fight and die even after you knew the sole way to truly end the war. However, you decided to try to fracture the prophecy...to get it to skip over some of the parts you hated... Voldemort attacked me, someone he was never supposed to interact with. The Fates ripped him from his body. Love, you said. It was love. No.

"You. It was your meddling. That was how I survived the Killing Curse; your plotting caused a potentially devastating partial paradox. A creature who should have been dead long before I was born attempted to kill me. Something like that should have ripped open the fabric of time."

Harry began to pace.

"Then, after I saved you temporarily from your doom, you sent me out of sight and mind, letting my reputation grow as you hid in your places of power, letting the target grow on me. Then you brought me back into this god-forsaken world of magic...and tempted me to my death as often as you could. End one of the subjects of prophecy and end the prophecy, eh? It won't work."

Albus was in tears the more he heard. The only way he could survive day to day was to blot away the future, the doom that hung over his head.

"You don't understand," Albus said. "I have worked so hard...."

"I don't care, Professor. You will fix the mistakes you've allowed to fester."

"I can't," Albus sobbed.

"You will fix your mistakes, Professor. And then you will fulfill your prophesied role. It is that simple. The question is how it is done...."

"You can't make me," the aged wizard shouted.

"I won't have to, Professor. You will want to. Trust me."

Harry smiled.

"The prophecy said that all your webs of lies must be unraveled, allowing you to accept your culpability. You must own up for your sister, your lover, your pupil, and your underserved nation. Those are the terms of the prophecy. I found what I needed in your pensieve to unravel each part of it: your neglect of your damaged sister, the fight that wound up with her dead, your duel with your former lover, your neglect of an orphan, your turning him away time and again, and then your role as the Chief Warlock. Your blindness, the ruination you inflicted. The innocent sent to prison; the guilty walking the streets; the stagnation that cropped up around you; the corruption everywhere visible."

Harry stopped twirling the Elder Wand. He pulled a green vial from his robe and held it in front of Dumbledore's face.

"Not completely good, not completely evil. You're trying to do some of the right things, like fighting Voldemort. But you're playing a dangerous game with Fudge and Umbridge. Letting them take over, just to keep the target off your back. So you can keep it on mine from every angle.

"My plan is simple. You have two choices: one, I dose you with this basilisk venom and arrange to have your pensieve memories made public. Fawkes is in no condition to save your life; your pet Snape will take the blame for this, along with killing Dolores Umbridge. I've already pulled your blackmail folder on Snape. It's sitting on your desk. I'll just set it alight...it'll look like you've pushed him too far and he snapped."

A pale Dumbledore shook his head. "No, no, I cannot do that."

"It would be the simple way, the easy way. The other option is more complex. I guess you might say it's the right way."

"Tell me."

"You sign an Unbreakable Contract...."

"No!"

Harry wasn't dissuaded. "The Contract will give you just enough magical latitude to solve the problems you've caused. You'll finally use the files you have on the Death Eaters, on Fudge and his corruptors, and the other problems you've avoided...so as to remain safe and secure. So much power, Professor, and never a will to use it. Now, you will use it. You will ensure Sirius Black, Weyman Greengrass, Ayren Taylor, and any other innocents in Azkaban are exonerated. You will personally bring down the Death Eaters, their funding, and then Voldemort himself. Then you will make your apologies. For your sister, your defeated and imprisoned lover, your soon-to-be-dead pupil, and the dupes of your nation. Then the prophecy will take you."

"No," said a broken looking Albus Dumbledore.

"Of course, you will have to step up immediately to take down Fudge and his rats. Say you've come into recently uncovered evidence. Take him down, take them all down. Then you will have to give up Hogwarts. Surrender it to Flitwick, McGonagall is too much your creature. You have three months to finish all your work."

Albus was quiet, too quiet. He was trying to think of loopholes. Harry had a grim smile on his face.

"The contract also prevents you from trying to fake your own death. I saw your plan to use someone, like Snape or Moody, to kill you. Of course, they're far less magically powerful...and their Killing Curses wouldn't work on someone like you. Interesting trick with the Killing Curse: only the strongest use it, as it can only kill those weaker than the caster. Voldemort was only scared of you, Professor, because only you had enough magical strength to kill him. I don't; no one else

in Britain currently does. It was one thing you counted on to kill me and save you from the prophecy."

"Fawkes!"

Harry began to laugh.

"Was he your only backup plan? Did you have nothing else prepared?"

"I didn't think anyone could get in here without my permission. And I didn't expect to be without my wand...."

"You trust too much in magic, Professor. A climbing line, a carabineer, and some practice can get anyone into a magically warded room with a window. It's the levitation charm this tower is warded against, not Muggle methods. A glass cutter works fine against enchanted glass, even if no magic would have penetrated it."

Albus almost hissed in frustration.

"What will it be, then?"

Albus' eyes strayed toward the Unbreakable Contract, developed to ensure that two persons could enter into an Unbreakable Agreement without the need of a Bonder, and then toward the vial of basilisk venom.

"Kill me, then, if you think you can. I've run from that prophecy ever since I heard it. I know I won't be able to fulfill it...."

"As you wish," Harry said.

Harry pulled Albus' hand from under his bedcovers and applied a small drop of the basilisk venom.

"Not in my mouth?"

"It's a contact poison. Doesn't matter if it's on your skin or straight into your bloodstream. You have maybe two minutes."

Harry returned to his chair and waited.

Albus was not quite so content. "Why, Harry? Why?"

"I couldn't let you win. Every scenario I had – me leaving, me staying but getting help, me doing anything other than this – resulted in you still in complete control: Hogwarts, the ICW, eventually back into the Wizengamot as its leader. I die for people who could care less...save for their comfortable lives...and you hold onto power. I don't think so."

"You still have to deal with Voldemort...."

"No, I don't. Your true death will end Voldemort's hold on power."

"You believe the prophecy?"

"No. You did. You believed in it, feared it, prepared for it, and...you've solved it, I'd wager. You've been researching the Dark Mark and other indirect ways of 'dealing' with the Death Eaters...and Voldemort. That folder I will take with me...after I deal with Snape and Umbridge and the others who will die now you've gone senile and snapped, just as the Daily Prophet claimed. In a day or two, every Death Eater will die...because of the information you compiled, but always refused to use."

"You would lay this at my feet."

"Of course. I will make your fame grow even greater in your death. But it will be a horrible sort of fame...and the target will all but disappear from me."

"No. No, you're killing me. You're destroying every positive memory of me."

"Exactly. Oblivion. Welcome to it."

Albus tried to form some words...but his mouth and tongue were now paralyzed. His eyes jerked around wildly...until they stopped moving around altogether.

Harry walked over and set the small vial of poison on Albus dresser and then knocked it over. The vicious fluid splashed over the wood, looking like the exact way that Albus died.

"Dobby, thank you for restraining the Professor. Everyone discounts house elf magic. Their mistake. Please bring Fawkes in here."

The house elf presented a miniature squawking phoenix. Harry placed it near Albus' bed. The scene would look like Albus knocking over his vial of poison, summoning his phoenix to heal him, but not expecting the phoenix's negative reaction to contact with the poison.

Dobby looked at the scene, but didn't look upset. "He meant to hurt Harry Potter sir?"

"He meant for me to die, Dobby."

The small elf just nodded.

"Now that we've lied to the Professor about some things...and told him the truth about the others, let us move onto the next steps...."

"The bad potions professor?"

"Yes, Dobby, Snape...and Umbridge. It's already past midnight and we have a long way to go. Let me throw a few papers on the fire in Dumbledore's office and that will dispose of any nosy portraits in there...for good. They should have been warning people about Albus Dumbledore for a long time. They deserve to burn."

Harry threw on his invisibility cloak and snuck into Dumbledore's office. A minute later, the place was in flames, although the damaging materials were safe. Dumbledore's legacy would survive less than twenty-four hours.

"Let us go, Dobby."

That late night interlude began a series of changes, very few of which Harry had foreseen. Snape died horribly, as did Umbridge and her sometime lover, the Minister of Magic. Two days later, the Dark Marks of every Death Eater exploded with chaotic magic. Three offices inside the Ministry of Magic were destroyed. The third floor of Azkaban – housing all the convicted Death Eaters – nearly ceased to exist. Malfoy, Parkinson, Nott, Carrow, and Yaxley Manors were all devastated in the explosions.

Voldemort himself ceased to exist one day later, as the magic holding him together lit up brighter than a sun for a fraction of a second. Albus Dumbledore had possessed the secret to his destruction for fifteen years, but had never acted upon his knowledge. He'd apparently feared it would set the prophecy into motion. Dumbledore had been waiting for Harry's death before attempting the ritual.

Harry told very few people what happened that night. Indeed, Sirius Black was one of the few. He was certainly curious how an Order of Release from Azkaban for Sirius –with a full explanation of circumstances – and several others were found among the late Dumbledore's papers. (They were signed by the former Minister of Magic, Bagnold, and Dumbledore, but never submitted for processing.)

When Harry read the paper that morning with news of a half dozens newly processed 'pardons' (real ones Dumbledore had held onto, probably forgotten about through the use of Memory Charms), he couldn't keep a small smirk off his face.

"Something on your mind, pup?"

"Nothing at all." Harry slowly scooped some cereal into his mouth.

"Your father couldn't keep a secret to save his life, Harry."

Harry let out an annoyed sigh. "Fine. Later tonight I'll tell you the full story, okay?"

"A good one?"

"The best."

Minerva Grows a Spine

A/N: McGonagall seems like such a flat character in canon, swaying whichever way the plot needs her to bend. Sometimes she bends rules (like getting Harry on the Quidditch team), sometimes she argues for the right thing (like not leaving Harry with the Dursleys), but mostly she comes across as a stern-looking doormat for Dumbledore's plans.

Here's a non-saccharine version where she gets a clue and does something useful...even if it seems pointless and merely symbolic at the time. After all, a massive avalanche can start from the most insignificant things.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was livid. Her boss, her friend, her mentor, her wartime general refused to listen to her.

It was not a new thing. He'd refused to hear her objections all those years ago when the pair of them dumped off Harry Potter on a concrete stoop like so much worthless trash. It had been a mistake, a monumental blunder.

It was easy to tell...she'd gone to observe the boy shortly after the first acceptance letter sent to him was destroyed, burned. She'd watched the Dursleys for another day and hadn't liked a bit of what she'd seen.

The boy had lived in a cupboard under the stairs. He was swimming in clothes that were old and far too large for him. He was ordered about like a scullery maid stuck working for an old fashioned Austrian hotelier.

Now that the boy was shortly to be at Hogwarts she could look out for him...see if she could maneuver him into a better situation. The Weasleys had too many mouths already and not enough attention to spread around. The Wood family was quite nice, perhaps... Or that nice soon-to-be-third-year...Sloper was it? There were a lot of decent families where Harry could find houseroom. He needn't be subjected to those horrible muggles any longer.

It served no purpose to her mind.

But all those ideas took a backseat once Albus explained in a special meeting about setting up a security regimen to protect the legendary Philosopher's Stone.

"Albus, have you had your annual physical at St. Mungo's?"

The old man just smiled. "Poppy certified me as fit as a fiddle."

Minerva frowned a bit. A school mediwitch, even one as dedicated as Poppy, wasn't a certified Healer. Plus she'd been working for Albus for a long time. Who knew what she might purposefully overlook?

In any case, Albus was in need of a mental screening.

"Do I need to explain the many reasons this is a terrible idea?"

"The goblins have expressed concern about being able to secure it," Dumbledore responded.

"They have quite a reputation," Flitwick mentioned, "but their true record isn't so great. Wizards are a lot trickier than a bunch of complacent goblins any day. When I consulted for them a few decades back, they only stopped eighty percent of the attempts. Eight vault robberies succeeded in the three years I worked for them."

Minerva scowled now. "Then if Flamel can't deal with it...and the goblins are incompetent beyond guarding a pile of bronze and silver coins...suggest that your colleague destroy the blasted stone. Better that than it fall into less than savory hands."

"Now, now," Albus said, stalling. He hadn't expected this type of reaction. His colleagues should be grateful at being able to add protections.

"This is more than a favor for an old friend, Minerva. This is a valuable magical artifact that we cannot lose to the enemy...nor can we just destroy it without thought. I have set the challenge. I expect all of you to meet it. Questions? If not, I'll expect your written

proposals in three days. I will, of course, provide the final protection myself."

"This is a bad idea, Albus," Minerva said.

"I'm with her on this," Flitwick added.

Snape just scowled, but looked resigned. Sprout was still in the Amazon still collecting rare magical plants, perhaps one of which would be useful for guarding the Stone. Hagrid was mumbling about runespoors and dragons as sentries.

Dumbledore smiled when he got up and walked out of the room.

Minerva was not convinced. Her anger got the best of her.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Dear Mr. Flamel,

I am deeply concerned that you've permitted Albus to secure your treasure inside a school for teenagers....

It was hard to write an indignant letter without veering off into the histrionic or the obscene. She'd had to start over three times before she got an acceptable draft.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The reply, containing rather unexpected news, came five days later. She had to read the letter a few times before she cottoned onto its true meaning.

A la recherché du temps perdu

Peridot, France

August 22, 1991

Dear Ms. McGonagall,

I am unaware of the circumstances under which you wrote a letter to me, but please let me assure you that all of my treasures, especially

the one I think you're alluding to, are still in my possession. While Albus and I collaborated several decades ago on some interesting projects, I never showed him any of my high level accomplishments in alchemy. Indeed, no person currently alive, save for my wife, has seen them. I certainly have not entrusted anything to Albus' care more recently as we've not been in correspondence these last thirty years.

I hope I have set your mind at ease, madam.

Nicholas

P.S. Please mind your manners the next time you feel the overwhelming urge to pick up a poisoned pen, madam. I pioneered most of the advancements in transfiguration in the last five centuries...but more than half of what I know hasn't been published anywhere. I'd hate to have to make a public spectacle out of you.

Nicholas' Boss, Perenelle

Minerva went pale when she realized Dumbledore was lying about the stone. It wasn't a protection scheme he was planning; it was an entrapment scheme. He was trying to lure potential thieves to the school; he was endangering the lives of everyone here.

Goblins were paid well for their security services...school children paid to learn things in a safe environment. There was no overlap between the two realities.

Her boss, her sometime friend was a madman. What to do? What to do!

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

At first, Minerva did nothing. She didn't let on that she knew about Dumbledore's lie, spread to a gossipy bunch of schoolteachers who were sure to spread it even further.

She wondered privately why Dumbledore had set up such a bad lie...one he hadn't even coordinated with Flamel. She supposed Dumbledore trusted in Flamel's legendary reclusiveness to keep any doubters at bay. What a stroke of luck McGonagall wrote an angry enough letter to merit a response from Flamel.

She did nothing except for observing Albus. He was different. The fervor of his actions; the grandiose tenor of his words spoken to the teachers in private...all very different. She waited, and watched, and disapproved silently.

That stance changed at Halloween the second that moron of a Defense instructor fainted after announcing the presence of a troll.

The danger was real. The fake 'Stone' was attracting strange events to Hogwarts. Just as Minerva had forecast. She wasn't a Seer by any means; she just had some gray matter between her ears.

Minerva cornered Dumbledore later that night. "Albus, you've got to stop this. Get rid of that Stone now."

"It's perfectly safe," he said, quite pleased with himself. Of course, Minerva realized the statement was very true. The 'Stone' here at Hogwarts was very unsafe; but the real one with Flamel, no one even knew what it looked like or where to start looking for it. The real Stone was, indeed, safe.

"Fine, the Stone is safe. But you're not the Headmaster of Hogwarts Bureau of Stone Protection. No, you're the Headmaster of a School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I'm concerned about the witches and wizards who are unsafe. Why we have two in the hospital right now. Had that troll been in the dungeon – where you sent all those Slytherin students, you ignorant fool – we could have had a dozen or more injuries! What are you thinking!"

Albus frowned at this outburst. "Watch your tongue, Minerva. I grant you a lot of privileges, but I am still your superior."

"I have never heard such words cross your lips. I thought we were friends. I only began teaching here at your request; I was perfectly happy as an independent spellcrafter, you know. Now, you're pulling these stunts. You're endangering lives and you've got this stupid little smile on your face whenever you look at the Potter boy. You may be a revered wizard, Albus, but I've known you a long time. Stop it; whatever you're planning, just stop it."

"Goodnight, professor. I don't think either of us will like where this argument is likely to lead."

"Goodnight, Mr. Dumbledore." She couldn't in good conscience call him Professor. Not after his dereliction of duty regarding the students.

She watched her...former...friend wander away.

She'd have to do something. It was time to come off the fence.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Dear Hogwarts Parent,

I am sorry to have to write you with distressing news. As you've no doubt heard, a mountain troll was able to gain access to Hogwarts on Halloween. Before it could be subdued, the beast managed to injure two students and destroy a few rooms of Hogwarts Castle.

Professor Dumbledore has launched an investigation into how the beast got past the school wards.

In the meantime, I wanted to calm any anxieties about this very odd occurrence. Rest assured, Hogwarts remains a very safe place.

Feel free to contact me or Professor Dumbledore with any questions or concerns.

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

It was disingenuous to a fault. Of course none of the parents had heard about the attack. Albus had put down a security net keeping news of the troll from leaking out. The Owlery had been closed for a few days while he worked on modifying memories or implanting coercions to keep the students silent or whatever rot he was planning.

But he hadn't expected Minerva to, in her own way, actively squelch the rumors, too...but in a way that brought them into the public eye.

The vague assurance of Hogwarts' safety was written in standard bureaucratic drivel...but it was guaranteed to create a flood of letters.

To Dumbledore, to the Prophet, to the Board of Governors, to the Minister himself (who had a niece named Buford among the sixth year Hufflepuffs).

Then Dumbledore's little schemes would likely fall apart, wouldn't they? Someone would have to wonder why they hadn't heard anything prior to Minerva's letter...why their little Sally or Ralph hadn't written with the story.

Minerva smiled and then summoned her personal house elf to take the letters to the Owlery. No student could get in right now, but nothing could stop a house elf.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

As predicted, the outcry was enormous. The Ministry – and the Aurors in particular, some of whom had children here – was beyond livid at not being informed earlier, say within five minutes of Quirrell's breathless announcement in the Great Hall.

The Board of Governors had launched an inquiry...and it would likely end in Dumbledore's dismissal. Particularly once Harry Potter's involvement became clear. If Dumbledore couldn't keep Potter safe, the man belonged in a retirement coven.

Eighteen children were withdrawn from Hogwarts, many of them Slytherins who had been ordered by Dumbledore to venture into an area where the troll was first reported. Surprisingly school donations from wealthy alumni dried up.

The house elves were in a tizzy over the number of letters, especially the rather massive number of Howlers, that found their way into the school. Dumbledore was reputed to be burning them rather than reading them, becoming more and more isolated.

A day before the Board of Governors arrived for its formal inquiry, Dumbledore cornered McGonagall outside the Great Hall.

"How could you?" He was almost hissing.

"I did my job. It was a schoolwide event and the parents needed to be notified and reassured before some rumors made them panic...."

"I made sure no rumors got out," Dumbledore admitted. In front of a hundred witnesses. That would cost him during the investigation. It might even be a criminal offense.

"Well, I wasn't in on your plans. I followed school protocols, Albus. Now let me pass, I have a detention to oversee and homework to grade."

"No, we will continue this conversation in my office. You will give me an Unbreakable Loyalty Oath, Minerva, or you won't be teaching here tomorrow."

She looked around at the gathered students. Albus' anger had overcome the cautious-style he normally employed in his interactions as Headmaster. He likely planned to layer new charms over these students to keep their knowledge locked away. Minerva wouldn't have it.

"I serve the school, Albus, not you. I don't think you're mentally well; I don't think you should be in charge here any longer. I would rather resign than bind myself to you. You're not acting in the best interests of the students or the school. Indeed, you're bringing a great shame upon the history of Hogwarts."

"That's enough, you sanctimonious hag. Write your letter and leave tonight. Whatever's still here, I'll tell the house elves to burn."

Albus began pushing his way through the students. "Dumbledore, if you harm or allow any student to come to harm, I will see you imprisoned for the rest of your days."

"No prison walls will ever hold me. You know that."

"If they're strong enough for Gellert, Albus, they're strong enough for you."

An hour later Minerva walked out of the castle with his belongings hovering along behind her.

The next day, a copy of her hastily written resignation letter appeared in the Daily Prophet. Filius Flitwick resigned twenty minutes before the Board of Governors meeting began. During the day-long meeting more resignations trickled in. By the time the

Governors broke for dinner, only Filch, Snape, the oblivious Trelawney, the near-retirement Kettleburn, and Quirrel were still among the paid staff. Even Pince resigned from the library.

Late that evening, the Board of Governors had no choice.

Madam Lucien, a member for seventeen years, made the pronouncement. "Dumbledore, you're stripped of your position. You've brought great shame to the institution...and then we discover you've been using coercive magic on your own students to prevent them from spreading what they know of you. We've obviously not paid enough attention...or else it was your compulsive spells that kept us from inquiring too deeply. The Aurors are here to take you in for questioning. All your files, all your records will be turned over to them. Merlin only knows what you've been doing here right under all our noses."

The only thing that kept Dumbledore from angry denunciations or whipping out his wand for a mass obliviation was the fact he'd been stripped of his wand by order of the Board of Governors...and enforced by three qualified Aurors (people Cornelius Fudge would never permit on his bodyguard detail as he didn't want to be arrested for corruption by the people supposed to protect him)...prior to the start of the meeting so many hours earlier.

It took three stunners to subdue Dumbledore. He was a powerful wizard after all...and he had trained himself in a number of odd disciplines, resisting magic must have been one of them.

The Governors met long into the evening while more Aurors began to tear apart Dumbledore's office.

The question: how to fix this mess?

It was a textbook crisis of confidence. The school was sound; the students were safe; the finances were in good order (assuming Dumbledore hadn't been cooking the books in some way). But it felt like a failed institution...and would soon become a failed institution if the Governors didn't act decisively now.

Lucien began the second part of the meeting. "Simple question, hard answer. How do we fix this?"

"The school has four teachers, all the ones who draw the worst reviews. How do we hire a new Head and basically replace the staff by the time Monday classes roll around," Antoine Gloue asked.

"I would put my name forward as a candidate for the Headmaster position," Lucius Malfoy...generously...volunteered.

"You have no experience running a school, Lucius, so don't even play games. With the mood I'm in, I have no problem holding a vote to remove you from the board right now," Madam Lucien said.

"I second the motion," Augusta Longbottom said, jumping on an unexpected opportunity.

Within minutes, because of an offhand comment, Lucius Malfoy was removed from the board for gross incompetence. He promised lawsuits; the Board promised to expel his son for his terrible grades (save in his Potions class).

"Now...we're done with the distractions. What the hell do we do? I'm of a mind to sack the remaining teachers just for sticking around."

"I second the motion," Augusta Longbottom said. This time a few of the stressed Governors managed to laugh a bit before deciding it was also a good idea. Dumbledore had been protecting Snape for a decade. They weren't blind to how terrible the man was as a teacher.

The motion passed unanimously.

"Now we have no teachers," Madame Lucien said. "Where do we go from here?"

"Only upward," Antoine Gloue muttered. "I hope."

"I wonder if we could talk Minerva back into Hogwarts," Augusta Longbottom said. "She'd been Albus' understudy for a long time. Normally she'd be too closely associated with him and his mess, but she was the only one to stand up to him. It would certainly be an appropriate first step."

Madam Lucien looked interested. "It's worth a shot. Let me see if I can get her on the Floo."

The old witch knelt on the floor in the Headmaster's Office and called out, "McGonagall Redoubt."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The next day, a smaller faculty took their seats at the Head Table. McGonagall had the center seat as the new Headmistress.

"I apologize for my absence, ladies and gentlemen. But a person must always stand on her principles. I am sorry I did not see my old friend, the Headmaster, for what he really was sooner. I am sorry if any of you suffered under my lack of insight into the man's true character

"That said, it is my pleasure to serve as your Headmistress. Because of recent staffing issues, we will be temporarily suspending our Potions and Care of Magical Creatures courses. Within a few weeks, we should be able to restart them, but we will try to organize informal study groups in these subjects. This is early enough in the term that it shouldn't affect any of our OWL or NEWT examinations. On a more somber note, the Board of Governors and I have decided to suspend the teaching of a Divination course. For those who wish it, we will test for divinatory abilities and arrange for one-on-one tuition in the coming weeks. As many of you know, a person is either born with the skills or she isn't. No amount of classwork can circumvent that. In its place, we will be introducing a Magical Languages elective."

All the recent news...McGonagall gone then back as Headmistress...every teacher resigning or being sacked...the Headmaster sacked and arrested...it was a bit much to handle. It took weeks for the gossip mongering to settle back to a lazy bubble.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Dear Mr. Flamel,

Let me apologize to you and your wife Perenelle about my hasty, ill-advised letter earlier this year. I had been led to believe that Albus Dumbledore had your permission to guard the Philosopher's Stone within the walls of Hogwarts. Your timely response showed me that Albus' assertion was untrue...and it showed me a side of my one-time mentor that I didn't like.

Because of your letter, and a number of unexpected consequences of my newfound vigilance, Albus is awaiting trial for a number of offenses and I am the new Headmistress at Hogwarts.

Along those lines, I was wondering if I could tempt you into spending the remainder of the school year instructing our students in potions. I have several excellent prospects for a full-time instructor come the fall, but no one to fill for the remainder of the school year.

If you're at all interested, I would be willing to floo over to discuss this with you in more detail. It is a very interesting story.

Best regards,

Minerva McGonagall

Headmistress

P.S. I also seem to have a temporary opening for a Transfiguration Mistress. Qualifications include: development of significant improvements in transfiguration over the last five hundred years and a razor sharp wit and pen. Do you know of any appropriate applicants, Madam Flamel?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It was an odd day in April when Severus Snape walked up to Hogwarts and attempted to pass the ward line.

He hadn't been himself in quite some time, not since he'd confronted his recently fired colleague Quirrell over the turmoil at Hogwarts.

"Your little stunt with that blasted troll cost me my job," Snape shouted.

Severus went to attack the man before a black mist emerged out of Quirrell's head...and then Severus was trapped inside his own body. He was made to do horrible things – nothing which would have normally shocked him, but still horrible.

But this ward line made him fearful. He knew it was a bad idea to try to cross it, but he wasn't in control any longer. The black mist in his head pushed his body forward.

And in that instant, the wards lit up in a glowing brightness strong enough to be seen by Muggles orbiting in space.

McGonagall had taken her duties as Headmistress seriously. She had consulted all the portraits about what needed to be done...and more than one reminded her about resetting the school wards. Albus had always bragged about them, but hadn't spent much time working on them. The very legend of them seemed enough to keep the school safe...until a troll got in.

When McGonagall finally went to the ward room, deep underneath the dungeon, she discovered a giant mess. No wonder a Troll had been able to bypass the wards...the Creature Repulsion wards had fallen some time ago and no one had bothered to repair them. The Anti-Malevolence Ward had actually been tampered with and destroyed...probably to enable Snape to work here. The man did bear a Dark Mark after all.

So, in her spare hours in the evening and on the weekends, Minerva learned about wards from the portraits of the headmasters who'd created and maintained them. It took months but she finally got them all back into proper function.

Much to Snape...and Voldemort's surprise.

The Anti-Malevolence Ward was at full power and it greatly objected to the Dark Mark and to an involuntary possession. The ward destroyed the possessing spirit and ignited the Dark Mark on Snape's body. Neither survived the encounter. Dealing with Voldemort's disembodied spirit, loosely tied to reality with horcruxes, required so much energy that a full magical sink – the one originally crafted by Helga Hufflepuff – was drained. It would take years for the ambient magics of Hogwarts to replenish it.

In the end, the spirit was dead.

McGonagall got a brief report in the back of her mind when the ward went off. Shocking. To think...that Dumbledore and his predecessors could have dealt with Voldemort and his supporters

just by maintaining the wards...by inviting the Dark Army to visit for a peace conference.

She arranged for a house elf to bury Snape's ashes, but she kept the little secret to herself.

Then she wrote out a letter to all the major alumni donors – many of whom were 'innocent' Death Eaters trying to whiten their reputations – and invited them to Founders' Day at Hogwarts, a new tradition. Students would demonstrate spells; the Quidditch Teams would put on an air show of sorts; the House Elves would prepare a massive picnic luncheon; several of the professors would give advanced lectures in their areas of expertise; the Castle and its facilities would be open to all visitors.

A few weeks later, the wards ended another forty lives all in the presence of Amelia Bones and other Aurors.

Because of the weakened magical sinks, these bodies only had the Dark Mark burned clean through, a fatal wound in every case. That sent a message, a powerful one. Even Hogwarts herself would fight in the war against intolerance and disorder.

When questioned by the Aurors about these 'new' wards, Minerva said, "I asked the portraits what I should do once I assumed my position. They said I needed to maintain and service the wards. So I did. It took months, given the state they were in. The school is known as a safe place because of the reputation of those wards, but Dumbledore and Dippet before him allowed them to fall to pieces. I had no idea this would happen when I reconfigured the wards. That Anti-Malevolence Ward was actually designed by Salazar Slytherin and emplaced by Godric Gryffindor. It harkens back to the founding of our school. They're not new at all; just newly awakened."

The investigation ended a few weeks later. Minerva cancelled the first Founders' Day but promised that no tragedy would happen during the second attempt the following year.

Hogwarts was back to being Hogwarts, a school.

Dumbledore lost his position in the Wizengamot and found himself under magical house arrest for the rest of his days. Pissed off

Wizengamot Elders, fearing for the safety of their grandchildren, can be quite harsh.

Harry Potter played Quidditch, went to live with Oliver Wood's family, and became Head Boy in his seventh year. After prying loose all the Dursley baggage, he proved himself a smart, curious lad. He didn't have the prankster side his father had, nor was he as relentless in studying as his mother had been...but he was more balanced and a very good influence on the school.

Minerva remained Headmistress for twenty-seven years, waiting one year after Dumbledore's death from extreme old age before retiring and turning over the reins to the renowned potions master, Verbal Fensmarsh.

Harry, the unknowing cause of Minerva's new backbone, played in the Quidditch League for seven years before retiring and starting a career in magical law. As wealthy as he and his wife Luna were, he didn't do it for the money. Rather his practice focused on family law and the protection of children. At one point, he managed to shut down a Muggle orphanage through the Muggle courts in order to rescue three abused magical children.

It was a thankless job, utterly unglamorous. But it was what Harry loved to do. Luna, of course, spent about twelve years pregnant, winding up the mother of fourteen children.

When asked, Luna explained. "My Harry is very amorous, a very gifted lover. So why would I want to refuse his special gift by taking a contraceptive potion? Plus I love children. Harry names them and I give them their nicknames. Why my little Snorkack couldn't be more precious, could he? And we now have enough to field two full Quidditch teams. Fourteen is a good round number."

Minerva herself had watched all of them go through Hogwarts. She retired to McGonagall Redoubt knowing she had done her best, even though Albus had warped her mind for a good long while.

It had been a painful road but she had walked it. She had walked it.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: Having a tragedy befall a school and then covering it up would cost any school administrator his position once the coverup was revealed. This is just common sense.

A few people wondered about Luna popping up as Harry's wife. Here is my brief response: a smarter, less beaten Harry has the confidence and fame to date almost everyone in Hogwarts at one time or another. He is never revealed as a Parselmouth, never suspected of entering himself into a Triwizard Tournament, etc. So, he just picks the girl who amuses him most...and it happens to be Luna, the most interesting of the HP female characters, in my opinion. This is probably the only story I've written where I give Harry a conventional relationship...as I am distinctly agnostic in all the 'shipping wars.

Hope you enjoyed it.

Short Term Solution; Long Term Consequences

A/N: I've read a few stories lately where powerful people notice that Dumbledore has violated the Potter will...and then proceed to let him do it. 'Oh, he'll learn. Doesn't matter if the poor tyke suffers.' Blah. Here's my response: devious goblins stretching the limits of their abilities.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Albus Dumbledore sat down for his morning tea and eggs on January 12, 1982. He was the first person down so far. He was the oldest person on staff...and had a small bladder that kept him up dreadfully. Maybe he'd have to cut back on the tea?

Albus smiled when he saw some Ravenclaws trickle into the Hall for breakfast...arguing over some topic or other. School was just getting back to normal. The students had only been back for a week after the holiday break. All the false excitement had ended...and people were back into their books and parchments.

It was nice to be back into a familiar routine. He'd been Headmaster for a decade and missed teaching some days...paperwork could be dreadfully boring. He'd taught transfiguration for a long, long time. Few youngsters truly appreciated the discipline, but every year he'd found a couple.

Maybe he could arrange to teach a seminar to sixth or seventh year students. It'd be nice to have more regular contact with students. It'd certainly make it easier to settle disputes over which children should become Head Boy and Head Girl. Oftentimes the conversation began and Albus found he didn't know the candidates at all, save for what they looked like when dining in the Great Hall.

It was bad to be out of touch...but he'd been so dreadfully busy with Voldemort and his troublemakers for most of his tenure as Headmaster. Yes...things were slower now, more time to do the things he loved.

He slathered jam on his toast and began to watch the students. Sprout walked in and smiled. Slughorn would be the last one in...he was getting so heavy. Perhaps it was time to allow the man to retire. After all, Severus Snape, Albus' new project, had just achieved his

Potions Mastery. And Slughorn kept demanding more money every year. Yes, perhaps a change was in order. A reward for Snape's good offices as a spy...and a proper retirement for Horace.

Albus smiled as he took another sip of tea. But when he went to put his hand down, he found his wrist had been suddenly bound in some type of manacle. His head whipped around...and he found himself staring at the frowning face of a goblin. Albus' eyebrow crooked upward.

This was a very strange thing...interrupting his nice, ordinary day.

"Excuse me," Albus said.

"I'm sorry, but I can't," the goblin responded. "I'm here as part of the Gringotts Annual Audit for 1981. You were a loose end, of course, so I've been assigned your case."

Albus dropped his tea cup. He'd only ever heard of the Gringotts Audits. All the rumors painted them in an...ahem, unfavorable light.

"I'm sure I've done nothing wrong, nothing at all, master goblin. Now if you'll release me, we can discuss this like civilized beings."

"Oh, I think not, Mr. Dumbledore. I've already adjudicated the matter. I'm just here to carry out the sentence."

Everyone in the room, not least of all Dumbledore, was paying very close attention now. There was a reason goblins were feared...and still trusted with handling wizard money. They were tricky, crafty monsters, but they were also scrupulously fair in all official situations.

Albus decided to be cautious...and ultra-polite. Goblins had earned their fearsome reputation, after all. "What matter are you referring to, master goblin?"

"Why, the will of James Potter."

Dumbledore had nothing to say back. The Potter will was something he did not want to discuss, not with a goblin and certainly not in front of the faculty and student body.

"Shall we adjourn to my office to discuss this?"

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Mr. Dumbledore." A second manacle closed around Albus' other wrist. He hadn't even noticed the goblin doing it.

"What are these metal bands and why are you using them on me?"

"It's required by the Audit, of course."

"I don't understand."

The goblin, who hadn't given his name, sighed in frustration. The wizard seemed particularly dumb, clearly unworthy of his vaunted reputation for brilliance.

"Your judgment is decided. Let's be going...."

"I am the Headmaster of this school," an increasingly livid Dumbledore shouted. "I am going nowhere. I demand an explanation."

The goblin just nodded. This was all very familiar to him. Most wizards got belligerent when they were caught. "Yes, yes. Fine. Did you think we wouldn't notice?"

"Notice what?" shot out of Dumbledore's mouth before he had a chance to think.

"That you signed the Potter will as a witness, were appointed the executor, and then proceeded to violate the terms of the will. You may be able to talk yourself out of any repercussions from the wizards...the Gringotts Audit, however, discovers all discrepancies."

Albus paled. The cat was out of the bag. Minerva, who'd just arrived, looked rather upset.

"I insist we adjourn to my office."

"I suspect you will need to rethink that choice. But, for the amusement, I'll permit it. Lead the way."

Albus hadn't walked this fast in several decades.

Five minutes later, Albus and his goblin 'adjudicator' stood in front of the gargoyle. "Licorice Wands."

The gargoyle didn't move.

"Licorice Wands." He spent a minute repeating his password...and nothing happened.

"I suppose you know why my office guardian won't respond to me?"

The goblin nodded. "Indeed, I do."

"Tell me."

"Because of your perfidy handling the Potter will, you've been discovered in the standard Gringotts Audit...and you've received the standard punishment."

Albus looked at the manacles on his wrists. "These," holding them up, "what do they do?"

"They're the best magical inhibitors that goblin runemasters can craft."

Albus fell over onto his posterior. He now understood why his guardian wouldn't work. He'd been artificially turned into a squib.

"Release me." He tried to summon up the tone of voice that could end an argument in the Wizengamot. It had a lot less potency now.

"In good time," the nameless goblin responded. "Once your sentence is complete."

"How long is this farce to continue?"

The goblin smiled. Row after row of teeth – sharklike – revealed themselves. "The standard punishment is a year and a day."

A lifetime without magic. How to maneuver his way out of this? How to repair the situation? Albus wanted to scream!

"Why was the Potter will so important to you?" Albus was searching for something, anything that could give him leverage to change or reduce this absurd punishment.

"Oh, I care not for the Potter Family. The last Head of the Potters was rather stupid in his human arrogance. But...any violation of the Gringotts rules makes me quite interested. Anything that gets me out of that hole in the ground is welcome, particularly a duty such as this. You have broken your oath as a witness to a will, thus your magic will be bound for a year and a day. You placed the Potter child with someone forbidden in the will...and did not even offer him to the listed families to raise."

"I could not. The blood wards to keep the child safe..."

"I care not for your sniveling. Goblins care only for the letter of the contract. You have yourself, and your forebears, to blame for this, Mr. Dumbledore. Do not blame me. Gringotts goblins, by contractual duty, uphold only the letter of a contract or a will. No exceptions."

Albus sat pitifully on the stone floor and tried to think of a solution. He had come afoul of a goblin; his magic was bound; everything was falling apart.

"I don't understand," Dumbledore murmured.

The goblin smiled. "After our last rebellion in 1744, we were put under a geas by our conquerors, wizards such as yourself, and made to focus on money rather than conquest. The powerful magic made us live under the earth...to put us in our place.

"Most wizards have forgotten why Goblin Rebellions are a thing of the past...we would die now if we were to try to reclaim our lands and our former glory. Indeed, what you've done to us is more dastardly than what you did to the woodland elves, now rendered useless little domestic servants by your geas. But the specific intent of the geas laid upon the goblins permits us our limited acts of vengeance.

"I care not for the Potters or their little orphan or for you. I care for the pain I can lawfully inflict. It gives my confined life purpose, Mr. Dumbledore."

Albus shut his eyes. Wizards created a geas to change the goblin...and the little green masters of the loophole spent all their time lusting after moments like this. Albus hadn't given a thought to the Potter will when he placed Harry with his muggle Aunt. Perhaps he should have, the goblins certainly did.

"It was within my discretion as the executor..." the words came haltingly off his tongue. He had no idea if the goblin would be receptive to the argument.

"You signed a contract as a witness. Fact. You then took up your role as executor and laid aside the will. Fact. A violation; a clear and palpable violation. After all, what right does a school administrator have to violate a will?"

"I hold the position of Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, too."

"Not anymore, Mr. Dumbledore. Temporary squibdom has removed you from the office. You may, of course, petition to be reinstated in a year or so, but no one ever punished in this way by goblins has ever talked their way back into power. You've also served your last day as Headmaster of a Magical School, I reckon."

"You can't do this."

"According to the 1744 Treaty...and that horrible geas your forebears designed...I can do nothing else. I will escort you off the grounds. Do you have a nonmagical place to live? I fear that most warding schemes, at least those approved by goblin warders, will react in a rather hostile manner to you. Purebloods, after all, loath squibs and demand such conformity from their warding schema."

Albus shook his head. "I protest."

"There is no appeal."

"Harry has a destiny. He must remain safe."

"My colleagues have already removed the child from the home of the Muggle relatives. They are likely already checking the health of the child before moving onto the formal reading of the will."

"His godfather is in prison. He must stay with his aunt."

"His godfather, another witness to the will, has been freed by our warriors so we may ascertain if he was a party in violating the will. If not, he has already exceeded the maximum stay in Azkaban without trial. The Ministry will either try him today, fall victim to a Special Gringotts Audit with truly dire penalties, or set him free. Perhaps the young Potter will live with the young Black. Or we may have to go down the list of other families, the Bones, the Trelises, the Mackinaw, or the Blueblades."

"You can't do this."

The goblin was no longer enjoying the pain of the broken man in front of him. The stupid squib hadn't even realized what the manacles really meant for his future.

"Stand up. I need to get you out of this place before the Hogwarts defenses against Muggles accidentally kill you."

Albus was shuddering in rage. He wanted to strike out and hit the bastard goblin. His whole life was in ruins right now. "I will set the Ministry on you. If not now, as a squib, then when I return to my full powers. Gringotts will burn."

The goblin smiled his evil smile once more and let out a small laugh. "For a smart wizard, you say the stupidest things. Now, stand up. Your door guardian will not let you enter. Your wand is more useful as kindling for a fire than for magic. We must leave now. A Gringotts representative will be informing the Ministry and the Hogwarts Board of Governors later this afternoon. They'll handle all the details."

"You can't do this. I am an important man. The school will crumble without me here...I fought Voldemort, I kept him at bay. You have to let me go."

The goblin just nodded. The squib's pain was becoming more interesting, finally.

"Walk with me now. Perhaps I will share something with you."

The aged wizard, once the master of this domain, was now a beaten pup. He got up and looked confused.

Fifteen minutes later, the goblin finally got Dumbledore outside the wards. "My task is done. Perhaps your brother in Hogsmeade will be able to assist you further."

"Wait. You promised to tell me something."

The goblin smiled. "I did. An excellent memory for one so old. Are you sure you wish to understand the truth of your punishment?"

"Yes!"

"Our records indicate you are 98 years of age."

"Middle age for a powerful wizard," Dumbledore agreed.

"Correct. But what about for a muggle or a squib?"

The wizard shrugged.

"Extreme old age. Fewer than one percent reach that age."

"What does that mean?"

"Your magic no longer protects you, Mr. Dumbledore. You unaided body will now have to deal with natural aging."

The pale Dumbledore went positively ashen. "I will die?"

"The odds are very much against you. Even if you survive your punishment, I doubt your mind will be as sharp, your joints as flexible, or you as able to pursue a career doing anything."

"This is a death sentence, then?"

"In wizards your age, almost always."

"Why not kill me, then?"

"It was a simple contract malfeasance. The geas prohibits lethal punishment for just a simple crime."

"But it works out to be the same."

"Life is all about the loopholes, Mr. Dumbledore. All the pleasure, all the pain, resides in the details. Good day, I will trouble you no further."

"But, Harry...."

"Oh, don't worry about that boy. Fortune favors the bold, so the Potter motto goes. The boy will do as he will...but I suspect he'll be smart enough to refrain from violating a contract arbitrated by a goblin."

The smiling goblin touched a small chunk of gold and disappeared.

Dumbledore found he could barely walk down the long road to Hogsmeade. His body seemed closer to failure with every step. It was nothing, what he'd done, nothing in the greater scheme of things. But this is what he was punished for. All his power gone; all his wisdom useless for living a muggle life.

It would be better to end things now.

Aberforth would have a few things he could mix together, a painless lethal cocktail. Better to die by choice than by force.

Within the hour, the Great Albus Dumbledore was dead...by his own hand in the face of a year without magic. By the end of the day, Sirius Black was in St. Mungo's healing and Harry Potter was in the pediatric suite having damage and malnutrition repaired.

The Dursleys, per the geas on the goblins, were 'rewarded' for their actions with pain three times worse than what they'd inflicted on their nephew. Vernon's heart burst, of course, but Petunia survived.

And, by the end of the day, people knew – they remembered with awe – why the goblins had the reputations they did. They were crafty, warlike monsters given very few liberties to exercise their bloodlust. Pity the unfortunate fools who crossed them. Another generation would remember; the goblins would have fewer targets of opportunity.

Wizards began to research the geas laid on the goblins...but no records remained. The goblins chafed under their bondage, and

were even more horrible to those caught in the Audit. All was...status quo.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: I like this version of a goblin. Bloodthirsty IRS auditors from hell!

Also, on the question of whether canon!Potters had a will. In my limited experience, every parent I know of has had a will drafted after the birth of their child/children, even ones I would consider imperfect parents. If the Potters were in a war and told to go into hiding, I am almost certain they would write a will dictating what should happen to their son. It's just...common sense.

All That Glisters Is Not Gold....

A/N: I've been reading a few of the Dark-Lord's-revolution-is-just-a-front-for-something-else stories. Here's my two knuts on the idea.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter walked out his house and straight onto the beach. He was teaching this afternoon...and they held classes outside when the weather was decent. While he'd been subjected to a ghost who didn't remember he was dead, Harry fancied he brought a bit more animation when he taught bits and pieces of wizarding and non-magical history.

Harry waved at his students circled up on the beach. The thirty children ranged in age from ten to fifteen. The younger ones were working in the greenhouse, learning about healing herbs. The older ones were learning magical construction techniques.

"Good afternoon," he said.

"Hello," a few of them responded. Others were just looking fondly toward the water. Harry realized he'd have an hour or ninety minutes at most before he completely lost their attention.

Harry lowered himself into the sand and smiled. All of his children were present, all six. He'd expect them to already know something of today's lesson.

"History today, right?" He got only a few eye rolls to his rhetorical question.

"Remember, history now, swimming later, then wand topics all tomorrow morning...."

That got some smiles.

"So, our story starts in the early 1970s in magical London. An old house at 12 Grimmauld Place. Orion Black hosts a meeting with his friends Abraxus Malfoy and Simony Flint. They finally have a good candidate for the plan they've long discussed: how to get hold of the gold locked in the vaults of dead families, so many thousands of tons of wizarding gold that had been untouchable for decades or

centuries. So many purebloods drooling over what they'd do with that type of money."

"Why couldn't they just take it?" Kenneth Potter, Harry's only son with Susan Bones, asked.

"Because they weren't stupid. They knew just passing a law in the Wizengamot, which the purebloods of Britain then and even now controlled, would just incite a goblin war...or even a general wizard rebellion. They had to have some...confusion in which the gold could easily disappear."

"Hold on, Professor Potter," Remus Longbottom said, Neville's only son with Hermione Granger. "These purebloods were wealthy. Why did they want more money? And how can 'confusion' hide someone stealing money?"

"Excellent questions. People with money always wanted more, especially Abraxus Malfoy. He had bribed generations of politicians to bend them to his will. The Malfoys were not as wealthy as they once were; he wanted to top off the coffers. Orion Black was glad to increase the wealth of his family...and their friend Simony Flint was, inevitably, a shady money lender by profession. How to make their plan work? They'd debated it for a decade by then.

"They needed a war, they'd decided. It'd be easy to legally steal the money using a corrupt Wizengamot...but everyone would know what they'd done. Records kept in peacetime, especially goblin records, would show exactly what happened. But...a Dark Lord invading the Ministry, invading Gringotts, destroying things left and right, it was almost inevitable that things disappear, wealth disappears into the belly of a dark army. Records fall apart and vanish; the goblin record keepers inside Gringotts die from spellfire. Money just vanishes. All it takes is a war."

That long explanation got his students' attention. They'd all asked many times to hear about Voldemort. Even those who disliked history class realized today's lesson was on the Voldemort Wars, stuff that Harry Potter didn't often talk about.

"These three wealthy purebloods had found their figurehead in a former classmate, a Slytherin House halfblood named Tom Riddle. He fancied himself some sort of a dark lord. He'd seduced a few

lower echelon purebloods as followers. That meeting, documented in a diary I found years ago in the Black Library, was where they decided it. Abraxus provided political support, weakening the Auror Corps through budgetary maneuvers; Orion Black began funneling money toward this Voldemort character; Simony Flint began recruiting more lower level purebloods. He found the Lestranges for Voldemort, then helped to ensure that the Lestrange children, brother Rodolphus and Rabastan, joined up. It became a dual project: get the wealth and weed out more of the useless families who'd been hoarding wealth. None of the three principals joined a raid or risked their lives. It was only much later that Abraxus and Orion realized how much their plans backfired when their sons Lucius and Regulus joined up with this figurehead."

A few hands went up when Harry paused in his story. Harry pointed toward Luna Lovegood's youngest daughter, this one by Fred Weasley.

"No one tried to stop them?"

"The Aurors were infiltrated by Dark supporters. The ones who weren't were specially targeted. One Auror named Moody was wounded five times, including the loss of an eye and a leg. The only act the Wizengamot did to help the war was place Barty Crouch, Sr., in charge. He was aggressive, but not very bright. His own son was a Death Eater...and Crouch didn't know for years. Otherwise, the Wizengamot held the purse strings tight as most of them knew they were safe. Most of them were, at the least, monetary supporters of the Dark Lord.

"Apart from official actions, a powerful wizard named Albus Dumbledore put together a private militia, which eventually included my mother and father, but it was small and mainly focused on responding to attacks. In the 1970s, eighteen pureblood families were destroyed entirely. Another forty were left with only one or two members still in England.

"Still, for all the devastation Voldemort caused, he never did what he was supposed to...invade the Ministry, invade Gringotts, and give the Malfoy-Black-Flint group the cover they needed to steal the dormant wealth inside Gringotts. Abraxus and Orion both died within years of Voldemort's demise, the ashes bitter in their mouths. Their

plan was brilliant...and completely unsuccessful. Simony Flint survived until Voldemort's second rise, but he was old and infirm."

More hands raised now. Harry pointed toward his youngest child, Lilac, his second child with Hermione Granger.

"Tell us how Voldemort 'died.' Please?"

Harry just smiled and nodded.

"Dumbledore was losing his war. The Dark purebloods weren't getting what they wanted. More than one Marked Death Eater wanted to leave Voldemort's service. No one counted on the Dark Lord to be as powerful as he was. Then, Albus Dumbledore heard a prophecy...and permitted a Death Eater to overhear part of it and report it to the Dark Lord...about a savior who would shortly be born. At that point it could have been Neville Longbottom or myself. The Dark Lord just so happened to have a servant named Peter Pettigrew, one of those minor purebloods, and my parents happened to trust him with the secret to where they were hiding. He picked me to attack, not Neville, because the Longbottoms hid better.

"He came and killed my father first, then he taunted my mother and even offered to spare her life if she gave me up. She refused and was killed. Then he turned his wand on me and experienced a magical singularity. Fate caused his spell to rebound. People held various theories why this happened. It was my mother's sacrifice or the power of love...or other forms of nonsense. In truth, no one knows what happened, or why. Plenty of mothers died protecting their children in the war, not just Lily Potter."

Tyler Weasley, fourth born of Charlie Weasley and a Romanian dragon handler he'd been dating for twenty years, started his question without raising his hand. "Okay, so he's dead, but then he comes back. Dad tried to explain it, but it didn't make any sense at all."

Harry laughed and it took him a moment to regain equilibrium. "Voldemort spent much of the 1950s and 1960s working on dark rituals to strengthen himself. One of the techniques was the horcrux, or the slivering of his soul and storing them elsewhere. A nasty, vile technique. It left him without a body after he attempted to kill me, but

he knew of several rituals to return him to a full, physical manifestation.

"He kidnapped me and used my blood in 1995 to regain a body. My godfather came to rescue me from one of Voldemort's plots in 1996. That was when he died. A few days later, I basically locked myself in the Black Library and started reading Sirius' journals. Then I came across Orion's written records – likely kept in case he ever needed to blackmail someone – and found out the real genesis of this war.

"Orion was a real monster...he knew his son was innocent and left him to rot...knew he had created a true monster by helping Voldemort, but did nothing to stop him. That's what convinced me more than anything, those journals. Magic was wasted on someone like him, like all his ideological successors, all the pureblood bigots, all the bigwigs sitting on the Wizengamot. It got me thinking. Before the next school year began, my plan – this island – was set."

Tyler had a follow-up question. "So, this Voldemort is still alive?"

"Probably. But it's not my problem. The Dark purebloods created this menace; they joined up even though he tortured them; they corrupted the government to make him next to impossible to stop. The Dark purebloods control the government and have for more than a century; Voldemort advocates a more severe form of pureblooded bigotry. From our studies of English non-magical history, this would be like the Conservative party coming under attack from an even more ultra-conservative terrorist group...made up of the same people by and large.

"I have nothing to fight for in this battle. The quote-unquote Light side purebloods say they're fighting for the Light, but their victory only puts the government back the way it was, with people like Black, Malfoy, and Flint in charge or in positions to bribe everyone. They don't seem to realize that they lose no matter what they do."

The young students sitting on the beach knew this wasn't the usual history lesson. Professor Potter never talked about these things...except on this single day every year. It was strange to think that the young man in front of them had helped make history.

Bobby Wood, the oldest child in this group and Oliver Wood's child by a witch who died in childbirth, took the next question. "So, you left

at the beginning of what would have been your sixth year at Hogwarts? Where did you go?"

Harry twisted his neck and cracked it a few times. "A few of my friends believed me right away. On September 1st, we went to the train station, but we didn't go to Hogwarts. By the time the train arrived near the school, we were already gone...into France. The Black Family had a large, unused parcel of land near the English Channel. We camped out in magical tents until it was time to enact our plan.

"When the Death Eaters attacked the Ministry about ten months later, we came back into England and turned the original Malfoy-Black-Flint plan around on them. We walked inside Gringotts while the goblins were otherwise occupied. Using time turners we constructed from Black Library books, we spent about nine turned hours breaking into three hundred fifteen vaults. We had house elves to help and we used never-full bags by the dozens.

"By the time the fires at the Ministry of Magic were extinguished, we were back in France. Within a week, we had negotiated a hundred year lease on this island. Within two weeks, we were fully moved...and the first layers of wards were up. Within a month, Voldemort conquered Britain...and then the Muggles began to fight back. They gassed a section of London centered around Diagon Alley. They captured several hundred magicals, including a stack of Death Eaters. The war escalated from there and people forgot about us.

"We forgot about them, too. Except for once per year when I give this little talk...."

Several students had their hand in the air.

"I'll be glad to answer questions for as long as you care to ask them. Many of the older students have already heard this history lesson a few times, so I'll go with some of our younger students." Harry pointed at Luna and Colin's oldest daughter, Harriet.

"How do you break into the goblin bank? We heard it was impossible to do...."

Harry smiled. "It's not impossible at all. They have a much sterner reputation than they deserve. Trying to mess with the vault doors will get you into trouble, of course, but one can just blast a new entry. Goblin enchantments work well on metal, but poorly on stone. We walked in, used the time turners, and walked out about fifteen minutes after we got in there. The goblins were so busy preparing for the defense of their bank that they didn't bother to look into what was going on in the tunnels."

The next questioner was from Neville and Hannah Abbott's only daughter, Clementine. "So that makes all of us thieves? Our parents at least are all thieves...."

Harry smiled and then gave in to his laugh. "That's a perfect way to describe it, Clem-Clem. We turned the great pureblood plot that brought about widespread dark support for Voldemort...we turned that plot against the plotters. We stole the money before they could; we abandoned these fools to the fate they deserved. We created this safe haven and allowed hundreds of witches and wizards to flee with us. Only a few dozen took us up on the offer."

Another of Harry Potter's sons, this one with Padma Patil, asked the next question. "I wanted to know why the fathers don't marry the mothers. You, Professor Potter, are my dad, but you have children with several other women. How did that happen?"

Harry didn't bother to remove the wry expression from his face. "I hope I don't need to give the sex ed lecture again, Thomas, if you're confused about the mechanics of where babies come from."

Thomas blushed when a lot of the other kids hooted at him and laughed.

"Your real question though is about the lack of monogamy. When we arrived here on this island, we realized we were too small a group to survive for a few generations if we all paired off like in a more standard society. So we all date and have as many children as we can. It's an unusual situation to solve some unusual problems. Good question."

The questions went on for another hour – covering everything from Albus Dumbledore's advanced senility while still Headmaster of Hogwarts to the present location of the Black Family library – before

the children remembered that they were on a beautiful beach. Class ended then even if a few people hung back to ask Harry some more questions.

Unsurprisingly, all of Hermione Granger's children were in this group.

Harry had to smile a bit. None of them had inherited her bushy hair, but they'd all gotten her insatiable curiosity.

"More questions?"

They came in full flow then. Harry wondered if he needed to renegotiate his agreement with the other Founders. They'd made Harry give a yearly talk on Founding Day – the anniversary of when they'd arrived on Cutibet Island – so that the true history of Voldemort and the stupid purebloods who'd enabled him wouldn't be lost. While the magic on England destroyed itself, dark battling dark for power; light trying to restore the old form of government, with the dark in control; Harry and his group would keep alive the best parts of the culture.

No one had plans to return to Britain, but it was always a possibility. They certainly possessed enough gold – from active Death Eater families made indigent over night, from the so-called dead families, too – to buy most of Britain. Perhaps, someday.

For now, Harry answered questions and relaxed on the beach. Voldemort was still alive – their connection through Harry's scar was still active – but it didn't matter. The Dark Lord would never find someone to betray the location of this island.

Eventually even the Granger children ran off to the waves. Harry got up, dusted himself off, and went to see what his present girlfriend, Luna Lovegood, was up to. They were still trying for a child, Harry's seventh and Luna's third.

Perhaps in a few years. Perhaps he'd deal with Voldemort. All the man's minions would be dead or insane from the Cruciatus. Dumbledore was bones in the ground; Snape was dead; Dolores Umbridge had burned to death. He pretended not to know much about what was happening in Britain, but his scar told him much.

The families who'd been invited to flee with Harry and the other Founders had mostly survived in France or America. Amelia Bones was one of the few adults who had come with Harry's group. Even Arthur and Molly Weasley remained in Britain when Charlie, Fred, and George left with Harry's group. Molly had physically restrained Ron and Ginny from leaving. Bill had arrived a few years later to help with some of the final layers of outer wards; he'd stayed and taken up with Alicia Spinnet as a steady girlfriend.

In reality, once Sirius died in Britain, Harry had nothing left to fight for...not once he realized the dark had started this as a heist. He wasn't saving the ruling caste from themselves so they could be even richer than before. No way.

Harry took off his shirt and walked into his house.

"Honey," he called out.

"In the kitchen," came the response.

"What are you making?"

"I made a boo-boo, dear. I spilled honey all over my chest and shoulders. Come and help me, please?"

Harry smiled and slipped out of his shorts.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

I don't know why Voldemort would need to use a war to take over the government when he had so many ideological supporters in the government to begin with. The only way that the Imperius defense worked after the first war was because the jury – the Wizengamot – was stacked. Here's my explanation as to why the dark would want, and support, a war. Think Die Hard...using a terrorist attack to hide a theft.

Lucius Malfoy Saves the World

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

AN: I've wondered why Lucius and his father before him joined up in a movement led by someone else (given their egomania). I tried to sift through the canon and make a case for why Lucius did what he did. I could not. Instead, I will make the case for why Lucius might want to finish what a fifteen-month-old Harry Potter started.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Lucius sat in his secret room and looked at the small black book in his hand. He turned it over and saw the words embossed into the leather: T.M. Riddle. He felt the pain, the throbbing, in his left forearm increase the longer he held the book.

He knew what he should do with the book: he should restore his master. He had waited more than a decade for his master to return, but it hadn't happened yet. He had met with Nott and Rowle to discuss what they knew a few days ago. Lucius could use this diary which he had been entrusted to hold to bring back his master – if he believed what the Dark Lord had told him so many years ago.

"Lucius, I require a service," the charismatic man had said.

"Yes, my Lord."

"You don't even wish to know what I require?"

"Please tell me," Lucius had responded.

"You live behind secure wards now that you are Head of the Malfoy Family?"

"Two hundred years of wards overlaid, my Lord."

The Dark Lord nodded. "There is a possession of mine, an old school diary. I have enchanted it in a particular way. This news of a prophecy has me unsettled, Lucius. Should I disappear for a time – should that fool Dumbledore claim to have slain me – then you must take this book and use it."

"What does it do, my Lord?"

"As I said, I have enchanted it. You ensure it passes to a minor pureblood – someone unimportant – and put a compulsion on it. The pureblood must begin to write in the diary. Someone of decent to exceptional magical ability, not a squib. The more the pureblood writes in the diary the more powerful the summoning ritual will be...."

"Summoning?"

The Dark Lord had glared at his servant. "I cannot be killed, Lucius. But I can be captured. If they claim I am dead, they will not have a body to show. What will have happened is that this prophecy will have allowed them to trap me. Imprison me. This book will drain the life of a pureblood to summon me out of whatever warded prison they have created. Even Nurmengard."

Lucius had been stunned. It had sounded like a work of exceptional genius. "I will, my Lord. I will."

"If you gift it to a school child, there could be an added benefit."

"Yes?"

"The process, if done under the Hogwarts wards, where that incompetent pretends to be a wise educator, the process will summon the ultimate protection left there by Salazar Slytherin."

Lucius had nodded, remembering the legends. "The mudbloods will die, my Lord?"

"You understand very well, Lucius. Very good."

"Might I ask how you learned all of this, my Lord?"

The Dark Lord had looked at his servant before nodding. "The magic retained on this island is nothing compared to what was known – what was done – in ages past, Lucius. I spent four years in Egypt in my youth reconstructing some of the most ancient magics that are still documented. This enchantment I salvaged from the abyss, renewed it."

"I understand," Lucius had said.

He sat in his secret room and turned the book over. He did not understand it at all. He had feared to retrieve this book in 1981 and use it. He had almost done it in 1984. He promised to do it when his father, Abraxus, passed in 1990. Still, it resided in this secret room under Malfoy Manor.

Now he needed to do something with it. It was more than a decade. If the Dark Lord were in a warded cell, he would be furious.

Lucius set the diary on the stone floor and began looking through the secret papers his father had kept. They had been removed to this chamber after the dementia set in and before the final end. Everyone was told it was dragon pox, but that was a less painful truth than the real one.

His father had believed in magical contracts, Lucius now remembered. All of his papers seemed to be on contract paper. Lucius read a copy of his betrothal agreement to Narcissa; he read the paper that purchased twenty percent of the Daily Prophet; he read...he read a contract with a man named Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Lucius read it a second time, then a third, and finally a fourth time.

He had been a fool not to look through these papers earlier. It had been hard losing his father, his mind gone a decade before his body followed, but Lucius had suffered so very much by not knowing about this particular contract.

Lucius read the words out loud in the secret room. "The House of Malfoy will provide material support to the Knights of Walpurgis and any successor organizations in exchange for an equal responsibility in leading the organization. So long as the Knights are dedicated to preserving and enhancing pureblood culture and hegemony, the House of Malfoy will allow its heirs to serve the cause as co-equals with the House of Slytherin. The House of Malfoy shall never serve the House of Slytherin, but will cooperate with it to achieve greater heights for all English purebloods."

His father had signed. Tom Marvolo Riddle had signed.

Lucius looked at the back of the diary again. T.M. Riddle, the name embossed in the leather. Voldemort had signed.

Why was Voldemort still alive if he had broken this contract? Lucius was not co-equal with Voldemort; he was a marked servant. Lucius ran the contract through a battery of detection spells. It was the Certification Charm that explained what had happened: someone had placed a powerful spell, perhaps a Confusing Spell, on the contract parchment.

When Voldemort marked Lucius, the contract had activated. But it made the wrong signatory pay: Abraxus Malfoy had lost his mind for a crime perpetrated on the House of Malfoy. Voldemort had betrayed the Malfoys – he had always planned to betray the Malfoys.

Lucius wanted to scream; he wanted to rail against his one-time master. But he needed a plan.

He finished looking through his dead father's contracts, looking for more of Voldemort's fingerprints. He found two further contracts – one spelling out a specific annual tithe in exchange for an equal value of stolen magical devices and spell books; the other an agreement for the House of Malfoy to purchase an old muggle house in a town called Little Hangleton – which further infuriated him, but added nothing to a plan.

He walked over to the large device on the other wall. It had been in the family vault since the early 1970s and was perhaps the most illegal enchanted object Lucius now controlled. It had no name, as it was one of a handful built by a mad German wizard in 1757, shortly before he was killed.

It could force the magic out of any magical creature or any wizard. The magic could be reused, perhaps to set a permanent enchantment on something. Lucius had ripped the magic out of bowtruckles and crups just to test the device. He had used the magic to add new layers to the wards of Malfoy Manor.

Now he stuck the diary in the device. He touched the runes at its base in the correct order.

He felt the process begin.

Eventually the magic was pulled from the pages, from the leather cover, from the binding. The shredded leavings landed under the

magic press while the ball of pure energy remained trapped inside the wooden frame.

Eventually a face appeared out of the energy. A young man's face, in pain, scowling. Lucius recognized it: the Dark Lord at a young age.

"What are you?" Lucius asked.

The mouth opened, but no words issued from the strange magical occurrence.

"You are the Dark Lord, aren't you? Part of him?"

The mouth closed.

"Thank you for agreeing to power the wards of the Malfoy Manor. Do a good job for us."

Lucius stuck a hunk of rock near the trapped ball of energy and pressed a rune. The energy fled from the magic press and remained within the large stone.

He opened the trap door up into the drawing room and pushed the stone out first. He climbed out, resealed the secret room, and put all the carpets back in place.

Lucius took the stone to the ward room and filled it into place. He looked at the charms and saw that the new layer of defenses was quite strong.

He went searching for his wife. He got into the longest hallway in the Manor and called out "Narcissa?"

"Lucius, I'm on the patio."

He walked through the double hung French windows. "There was a book that was part of your dowry, dear. A book from the Black Library. Do you remember where it went?"

"Abraxus wanted it. Did he stick it in the library?"

"Dobby!"

A wary house elf appeared. "Yes, Master?"

"Search the library. There may be a book in there originally from the Black Library. It is perhaps four centimeters thick, covered in black leather. Title is... Narcissa, do you remember?"

"No."

"It has no author," Lucius said. "No credited author. And the title is...right, the title is Übel Atmet." Evil Breaths.

"I will be looking," the house elf said before it disappeared.

"What's this all about?"

"A horrible realization, dear. I think my father made a bargain with the Dark Lord. I think I was lied to for years. I think my father was killed by the Dark Lord...."

"What?"

"Yes."

"What will you do when he returns?"

Lucius nodded. "I suppose I have to ensure he never does, my dear. Never."

"He was beyond all of us, Lucius. Be sane for a moment."

"I have a clue about what he did. That's why I need that book."

"Don't drag our son into this."

"He's at Hogwarts."

"No, he's on the Express right now. He'll be back in a few hours."

Lucius rubbed at his temples. "It slipped my mind."

"I know."

"I will go with you to fetch him."

"As you should," Narcissa said. "Keep your plotting to your locked office, alright?"

"Yes."

They adjourned to an early, languid lunch. Narcissa picked the menus and Lucius knew better than to comment negatively on them. Still, he did not like a dish composed exclusively of hummingbird tongues. They were like tiny little worms and quite disgusting.

As Lucius was breaking the caramelized sugar coating on his pudding, Dobby popped into the room with a leather book in his little hands. He shoved it at Lucius. The wizard ripped the volume away from the creature.

"Begone."

The elf disappeared.

Narcissa looked up from her grapefruit half and shook her head. "Not in the dining room."

"This could be the answer...."

"Which can wait until after pudding."

Lucius set the book on his legs so it was out of her sight. He finished his pudding in four bites and waited for his wife to finish her dainty bites of the grapefruit.

His fingers began to drum on the book. Patience was not a Malfoy virtue.

Finally Narcissa set down her grapefruit spoon. "You have an hour before we need to fetch Draco."

"I shall meet you in the front hall then."

He walked as fast as he could to his office. He closed and locked the door and began to read the handwritten volume. It was in German, but Lucius was proficient in four languages.

It took him only twenty minutes to find the right term: horcrux. He almost lost his lunch from the reading he did. Slivering a soul; accepting the madness the process guaranteed; immortality at the cost of everything else.

It made it much harder to destroy the man who'd betrayed Abraxus Malfoy.

There was a way, of course.

He got as far as he could before one fifteen rolled around. He locked the vile little book in his desk and met his wife in the foyer.

"Any solutions?"

Lucius looked paler than normal, but he did nod. "I have an idea what that madman did. But unwinding the magic he used is not easy, my dear."

"Take your time; do it right."

"Until today I would have said that the Malfoys do everything the right way. Now...now...I find I will take your advice, wife."

"Good." She disappeared.

Lucius followed behind her.

They arrived, by longstanding tradition, in a small room in King's Cross Station. They walked, hand in hand, toward Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ to wait for the arrival of the train.

It was early by fifteen minutes. Draco was one of the last ones off. He had a scowl on his face.

"Everything alright, Draco?" Narcissa asked.

"Potter."

"Oh."

The little blond boy nodded, but said nothing else. He knew his mother would take great pains to tease the answer out of him later.

"Let's get your trunk," Lucius said. "I'm sure you'll be glad to be back at the Manor."

"Hogwarts is awful," Draco said.

"We'll talk when we get home." Lucius walked off and collected his son's trunk and then led all three of them to the apparition point. Narcissa disappeared with the trunk while Lucius took his son.

They adjourned to the solarium. The house elves promptly brought in chocolate covered biscuits and tea. It wasn't time for High Tea just yet, but a little snack was in order for Draco after such a long journey.

"So, my son, what was your favorite class?" Lucius asked after Draco helped himself to a biscuit.

The boy finished chewing his snack before responding, as anyone of manners should. "Potions."

"Really?" Lucius asked. Draco was rather nervous out of doors so it surprised him that his son enjoyed chopping up dead things and boiling them.

"Yes, Professor Snape is a good teacher, better than that old bag McGonagall."

Narcissa smiled. She too had a Transfiguration Mastery, but she recognized she had some way to go to match wits with Dumbledore or McGonagall.

"How were your Transfiguration marks, then?" she asked her son.

Draco picked up another biscuit in lieu of answering. It was, of course, an answer in itself.

"How was your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" Lucius asked. He was a school Governor and had been trying to argue for better instructors for the last three years.

"Useless, then he fled the school...."

Lucius frowned. He hadn't heard any of this. "Who told you that?"

"He wasn't at the last few meals, just gone. There was a rumor going around that he was a Dark Wizard, that Potter had killed him somehow. But Potter can't even tie his own laces."

Lucius wanted to explore this obsession with Potter, who was probably just an average young wizard, a half-blood. But he needed to know about Quirrell first.

"Did you learn anything from him?"

Draco shook his head. "He stuttered all the time and stank of garlic. A half-trained Cornish pixie would have done a better job."

"I see," Lucius said. "I think it's time I had a chat with the Headmaster about this."

"He's completely round the bend."

"He was then, too, when I learned Transfiguration from him."

Lucius smiled at his heir and left the room. Narcissa would pick his mind clean of whatever information he did have. Lucius walked to the main closet and fetched out his most imposing, formal robe.

He had a long talk – a long overdue chat – with Dumbledore, that slippery arse.

He returned home that evening long past the dinner hour. He went into the formal parlour and sat. Narcissa joined him a few minutes later.

"Draco's out feeding his Abraxan."

"That's good."

"How did your visit go?"

Lucius blinked and sighed. "Dumbledore's still in charge, but barely."

"Oh?" That sounded like good news to Narcissa.

"I caught him before he went off on vacation. We talked, then I yelled, and he tried to dismiss me. I called an emergency Governors' meeting and forced him to explain about Quirrell. Somehow the Dark Lord was inhabiting him...."

"What?"

"My reaction exactly."

Narcissa sat for a few minutes before she nodded.

"Apparently Potter really did have a confrontation with Quirrell, killed him somehow. Dumbledore was especially opaque on the mechanism. Clearly self-defense, but Dumbledore was trying to keep it quiet."

"You pushed to oust him?"

"Didn't have to. Bertie Tobbler made the motion. Failed by one vote. Dumbledore knows the score, I'd bet."

"What are you going to do about the Dark Lord? You bear his mark but also know he's not dead."

Lucius nodded. "He needs to pay for what he did to my father."

"He's a brilliant wizard without moral compunction."

"I need to harden myself, make myself even more horrible."

"Don't forget you need to come back to me and Draco at the end."

"I will," Lucius said. "I will."

He retired to his office, ordered a meal from Dobby, and began scratching ideas into parchment. He barely noticed when the food arrived. He needed more information on horcruxes, on how to destroy them.

He would see Fudge in the morning and get a pass to visit with an Unspeakable. That was the place to start.

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